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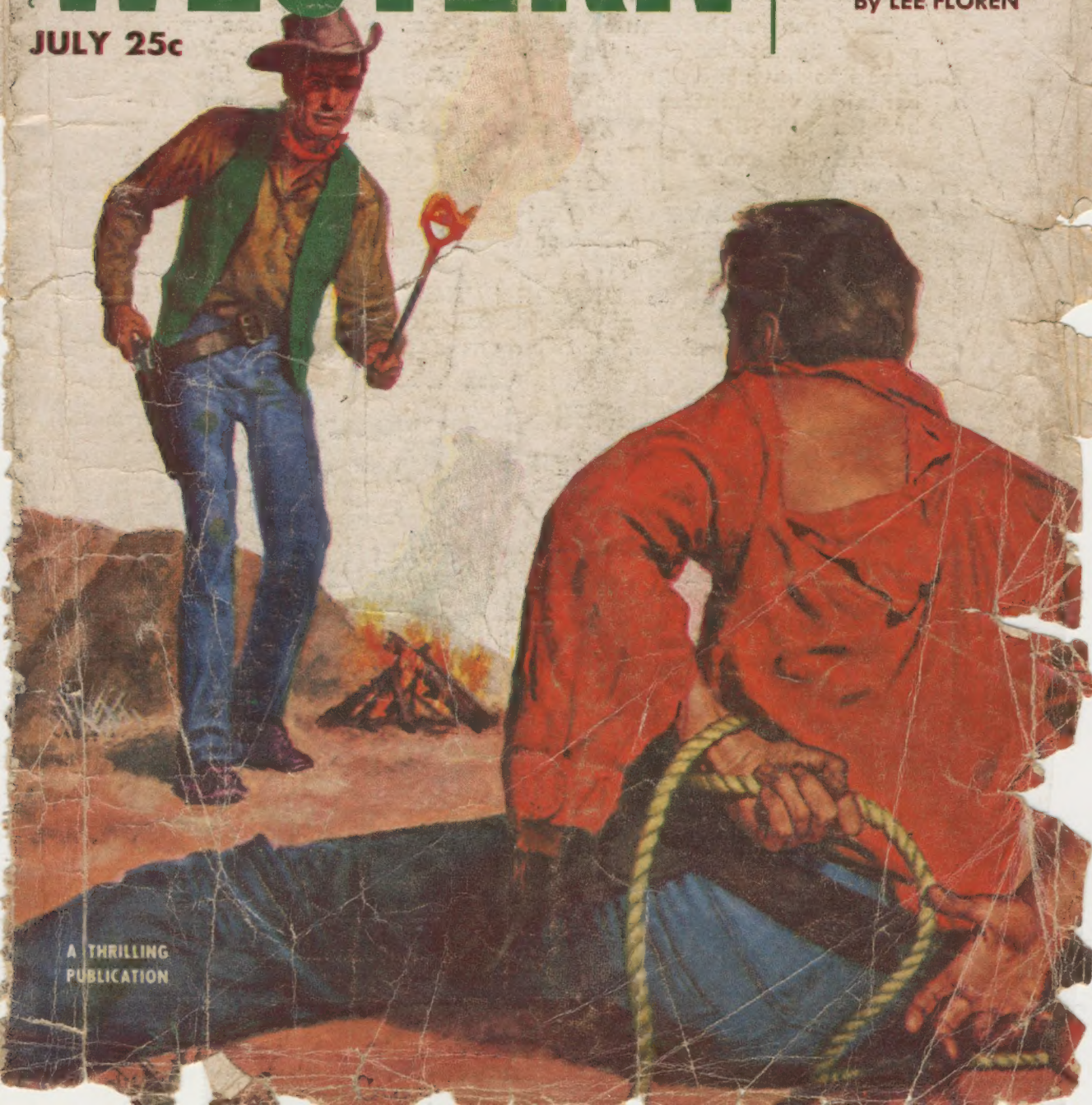

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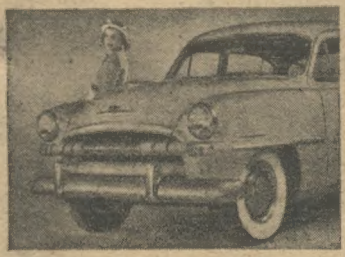

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# EXCITING WESTERN

Vol. 25, No. 3

JULY 1953

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



**Two Novels**

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*This was Wilkes's big chance. All they asked of him was that he gun down a fellow officer*

STRANGER ON THE PROD — Lee Floren — 86
*They were waiting for Jamison. If he wanted war—they were just the men to serve it up!*

**A Novelet**

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*Both Jessie and the kid were that way: proud as all hell—and too damned willing to fight!*

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EVERETT H. ORTNER, Editor

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# TRAIL BLAZERS

**Old Pte was more than mere meat. He was a roaring, galloping way of life**

ON AN ARMY reservation out here in Arizona the other day they had a buffalo shoot in which two hundred lucky hunters who drew the right lottery tickets were allowed to thin out two hundred selected animals. The shoot was necessary to keep the herd of four hundred and fifty cut down to proper size for the grazing area. Twenty a day for ten days were killed while a special crew of skinners butchered. The hunter got the head and skin and one fore quarter. The state sold the other three quarters for thirty dollars apiece.

Quite a far cry from the days of the Sioux and the old-time trappers. Next to the Apache, the Sioux was the bitterest enemy of the white man, and for good reason. The buffalo was his life. When a run on a herd had been completed and the big carcasses dotted the plain, the first thing the warriors did was to knock a big hole in the skull with an axe, scoop out the brains and eat them raw.

Only then did the skinners get to work.

They first rolled the carcass on its belly with legs outspread and started skinning down the back, fletching the hide off on both sides to pile up the meat. The squaws were ready with buffalo paunch pots to drain off the blood to flavor stew and often drink raw.

By the time the great carcass was cut up and loaded on the ponies, nothing was left behind except perhaps a damp spot on the ground. The Sioux used everything. Plenty of fresh hump and ribs of which they could eat five to six pounds at a sitting, and then go back in two hours and eat some more. Dried meat and fat for winter soups and stews when the great snow storm swirled around the lodges on the Powder River. Just take the great paunch, fill it with meat and water, and begin dropping in red-hot stones to bring it to a boil. Rawhide was used to make saddles, bridles, travois lashings, saddle bags, bow and quiver cases, ropes, bags, boxes, and a hundred other things necessary to the comfort of an Indian family.

During summers the Sioux often moved camp by water portage. They built a large framework of green, flexible branches, lashing it together with rawhide strips. Over it they stretched the thick, tough hides of the old bulls, cementing them water tight with glue made from boiled hoofs.

This glue was also used to cement battle and throwing axe heads, fasten on arrow head and feather to reed shafts, making deadly lances. Deadly lances, yes—until they cut away the thick part of the shoulder skin and fashioned it into a shield as hard as iron and as difficult to penetrate. From the skin of the hock came material for an ideal winter boot. Ladles and spoons and combs came

from the horns, boiled soft and easily shaped.

During winters when the Sioux trapper was out after beaver, otter, mink and wolves, he used a rawhide sled with runners made from rib bones to haul in his catch. From the much softer hide of the buffalo cow, he wore a winter cape beneath which was a shirt, pants and leggings. It also furnished him with soft, luxurious piles of sleeping skins than which there was nothing warmer. On these he lounged with his back against a framework covered with more of the warm robes.

He lived in absolute comfort, sitting there smoking and fashioning a battle axe from a scapular bone, lashing it with rawhide and gluing with hoof glue. At the same time, his wife used a cannon bone to dress a hide, or used sinew and bone as needle and thread to fashion more clothing. When she swept out the teepee, she used as a broom the buffalo's tail.

Because of its lighter weight the Sioux made his teepee covering from the hides of the cow, fitting and gluing them together to fit the lodge poles. It not only was less weight on the travois, but it made the shifting of the flaps and poles easier when the wind changed and the smoke hole wouldn't draw.

As soon as the snows began to melt in the spring, the whole Sioux nation, men, women and kids, was impatient to be on the move. The warriors wanted first to hunt some fresh meat and then go pick a fight with the Crows or Pawnees or the tough Blackfeet.

Once out on the prairie, wet and sometimes pretty cold until the sun came out higher, the women and children were left behind with the old ones and pack ponies. Yelling warriors, whooping in sheer exuberance, dashed off on their skinny ponies; dashing back and forth and fighting mock battles.

There would be fresh meat to eat, horses to steal, and scalps to count coup on. But best of all old Pte, the bull buffalo, was on the way north again with his cows and the new calves born down there far away in the land of the Comanches. Pte with his thick old hide, his stupid old head full of raw brains, his bone marrow for Indian butter and his rolling fat to make pemmican. Pte was on the way again and life was good for the Sioux nation.

*—William Hopson*


# He Asked Permission to Stay

***Major William E. Barber, USMC***

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

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# Sagebrush Who's Who

By Joe Walsh

YOU may know that a tenderfoot is usually called a shorthorn, pilgrim or Johnny Newcomer, and a bone-seasoned waddy is branded a longhorn or rawhide, but how much do you savvy about the other handles that Western folks wear? Well, pardner, this is your chance to find out.

Below, on the left, we've rounded up twenty kinds of people who live in the West. On the right, sorta scrambled-like, are their monikers. Your job is to pair 'em up.

Dude wranglers and such will have trouble corralling up to 10 answers; folks with fair-to-middlin' "cow sense" should rope in 11 to 15; while veteran sourdoughs are sure to exceed these figures. Check your answers against the correct ones on the bottom of the page.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | **Preacher** | *(a) Sage hen* |
| 2. | **Blacksmith** | *(b) Sin buster* |
| 3. | **Assistant foreman** | *(c) Sagebrush philosopher* |
| 4. | **Camp tender** | *(d) Dew wrangler* |
| 5. | **Cattle rustler** | *(e) Hoof shaper* |
| 6. | **Professional horsebreaker** | *(f) Windjammer* |
| 7. | **Stunt rider** | *(g) Pack rat* |
| 8. | **Cattle brander** | *(h) Buck nun* |
| 9. | **River driver** | *(i) Prairie rooster* |
| 10. | **Bachelor** | *(j) Contract buster* |
| 11. | **Liar or boaster** | *(k) Paint dauber* |
| 12. | **Petty thief** | *(l) Ridge runner* |
| 13. | **Loquacious Westerner** | *(m) Road agent* |
| 14. | **Western woman** | *(n) Scab herder* |
| 15. | **Male prairie dweller** | *(o) Camp jerker* |
| 16. | **Highwayman** | *(p) Brand blotcher* |
| 17. | **Mountain dweller** | *(q) Ditch rider* |
| 18. | **Mexican sheepherder** | *(r) Carnival hand* |
| 19. | **One who herds in the morning** | *(s) Segundo* |
| 20. | **Overseer who allots water to farmers** | *(t) White-water bucko* |

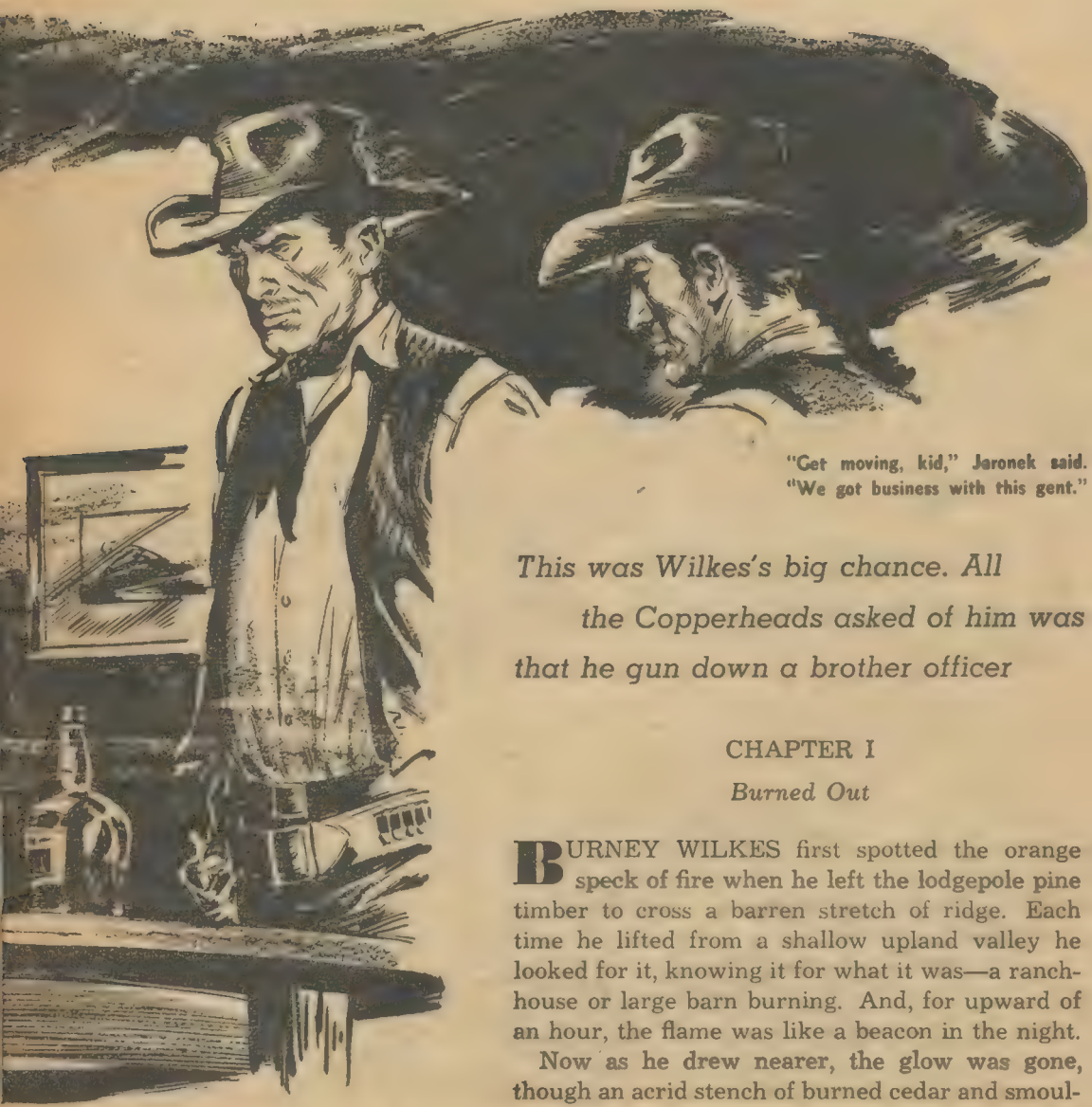
**ANSWERS**

1-b, 2-e, 3-s, 4-q, 5-p, 6-j, 7-r, 8-k, 9-t, 10-h, 11-f, 12-g, 13-c, 14-a, 15-i, 16-m, 17-l, 18-n, 19-d, 20-o.

# The BACK-SHOOTING

# LEGION

## A Novel by AL STORM



"Get moving, kid," Jaronek said. "We got business with this gent."

*This was Wilkes's big chance. All the Copperheads asked of him was that he gun down a brother officer*

### CHAPTER I

*Burned Out*

BURNEY WILKES first spotted the orange speck of fire when he left the lodgepole pine timber to cross a barren stretch of ridge. Each time he lifted from a shallow upland valley he looked for it, knowing it for what it was—a ranch-house or large barn burning. And, for upward of an hour, the flame was like a beacon in the night.

Now as he drew nearer, the glow was gone, though an acrid stench of burned cedar and smoul-

dering pine logs was sharp on a fitful breeze that came up from the valley below. Reining in, Wilkes sat his horse for a moment, debating. There would be many people gathered here, friends come to help, neighbors rushing over to see what they could do.

He let his mount pick a way slowly down into the thicker gloom of over-hanging trees. The silence set him wondering. There should have been shouts, or loud talk, the sounds made by stock keyed high by excitement and fear. But the night held only the creak of his own saddle gear and the whimper of breeze through tiptop needles. Even when the trees ended, giving way to a long open valley, there was no sound. A red smoulder ahead glowed vaguely—and there were no neighbors about either.

Wilkes checked his mount uneasily. This had been a complete burn-out, even to corral fences and outbuildings. His mount tossed its head, trying to back away. He fought the animal forward toward the blue-red rectangles and squares of the smoldering glow that marred the meadow floor.

The horse minced around, and Wilkes looked down at a sprawled body. His glance lifted, and he saw another dim, huddled shape lying some yards away. Beyond, a yard-high stake had been driven into the ground and topped with a broken strip of board. The starlight was bright enough so that by bending leaning from the saddle he could make out the one word printed on the the board with tar or thick axle grease: COPPERHEADS.

He knew then the reason for the silence and absence of neighbors, and resentment stirred him. War had its place on the fields to the east where Gray met Blue over bloodied bayonets. But this cleavage which visited destruction at the hearthside, the suspicions that walked with a man in town or shared his pew in church, was another thing.

Here was violence without effect, a blood spatter which contributed nothing to either cause, yet was torment and agony and grief. He hated it with a vehemence that only intimate knowledge of the necessary carnage which war meant could bring. Hated it, fought it—and yet was part of it.

A SLOW circuit of the vicinity brought to view no more dead. He rode back to the stake and dismounted. And then he stopped short. A voice spoke out of the shadows.

"Don't move! I can see you plain! If you move, I'll shoot!"

Wilkes stood motionless. The voice was that of a youth or a woman. In either case, its quaver warned him of uncertain nerves, and a trembling finger could touch off a trigger before whoever was holding the gun realized it or was ready to shoot.

"I just rode up," he said carefully. "I saw the fire from back in the hills. I thought maybe I could help."

The night held his words so that it seemed that if he walked away they would still be hanging there. Starlight made a faint, thin sparkle in the blackness of the trees that might be cast by a worn gun sight. He watched it, trying to penetrate the shadows and make out who was covering him, or if there were others. When the sparkle moved, he stiffened involuntarily.

"You—where's Horton?" the quavering voice demanded.

"I told you, I'm a stranger here. There are two men laying here close—both dead. Maybe one of them is Horton."

"Strike a light. Let's see your face."

Wilkes hesitated. Whoever was behind that gun knew the tricks. But he struck a light, cupping his palms against the breeze and letting the glow play upward into his face. Now he could see nothing beyond the yellow globe of light, which maybe was half the purpose in having him strike the match. He stood that way until it burned down and he was forced to flip it away.

"All right, mister. I—I guess I'll have to believe you." The quaver was more pronounced. Because of a sob held back, Wilkes suspected. The shadows stirred and a slender, boyish figure hesitantly

emerged, the rifle muzzle still held upon him. The one who emerged peered about, then slowly approached.

Wilkes could make out long plaits of ebony hair below a mannish sombrero. As distance dissolved between them, he saw rounded thighs in tight levis. A perfume came to him that was far removed from the sharp, biting odor of burned wood and scorched ironwork.

"Ma'am," he said as she hesitated beside the nearest body, "if this is your place—"

She did not answer. First one dead man, then the other was turned face-up. Wilkes saw her shoulders hunch and shudder to an upbuild of emotion as she straightened the crumpled limbs.

"Kin, ma'am?"

She turned. "Who dares claim kin, or friends, or even neighbors now?" Her cheeks glistened with tears where the sombrero did not shadow them. "Uncle Hort wasn't hurting anyone. He and Bob just wanted to ranch and be left alone."

"I'll take them to Buckhorn," Wilkes offered, "if we can find some way to haul them. "I'm going that way."

Her voice turned bitter. You so much as touch them and you'll be marked for what they got!"

"I've been marked before."

"Not by Cyrus Peabody! Not by men like that gang of night-riders he—"

"I'll take my chances."

She tilted her head to look up at Wilkes and he looked into a face whose beauty startled him. He removed his hat.

"You're going to Buckhorn?" she asked slowly. It's your choice to make, and whichever way you choose will pit you against a hundred enemies."

"Like Cyrus Peabody?" he asked. "And this?" His hand gestured toward the smoldering ashes of a ranch home. "Maybe I'm not one for making my decisions known! Maybe I like to walk my own path."

Her laugh was brittle. Abruptly she sobered. "Don't go there, mister. If you're just drifting, head on south, or north. Buckhorn—"

"Buckhorn is in the market for horses, I've heard. I've got horses to sell."

Her head jerked. "Horses!"

Wilkes nodded. The sombrero brim was again shading her face. She drew a deep breath that lifted her breasts against the man's shirt she wore. He thought she was going to speak.

When she didn't, he asked, "There's a good market in Buckhorn, isn't there? I didn't make the ride for nothing?"

"No, you didn't. You'll find your market."

The breeze eddied, bringing smoke and biting smell across them like a blanket. Both coughed.

"About that market—" Wilkes persisted, when he got his breath.

"Damn your horse market!" the girl flared. "Men are here dead! Their place burned out! Maybe half a dozen other families face the same thing tonight, and you prattle about a market for horses!"

Wilkes squirmed uncomfortably. "I could take the men to town for you if—"

She turned away. "I tied my horse in the trees. I'll get it. You can get—them ready." Her voice made plain that she wanted to be alone with her grief for these few minutes.

Wilkes nodded and stood watching as she strode into the gloom of the trees. When she was out of sight he got a stubby clay pipe from his shirt pocket and fitted a stem into place. Somewhere far back in the hills a wolf howled. He listened carefully as the sound sobbed across the stars. Somehow the lonely faraway cry drove deep into a loneliness that is the primordial vestige of all men. He glanced toward the trees, lighted his pipe, and extinguished the match with a sharp, abrupt pinch of his fingers.

Twice he stirred impatiently. When the pipe was smoked down, he knew that he had been flimflammed. The girl wasn't coming back. Her story of going for a horse had been a dodge to get away from him. For all the tears, the sob in her voice, the grief too deep to be feigned, she was leaving the two dead men to a stranger.

Wilkes swore softly as he knocked out the pipe dottle. The men were there—

dead. He searched each one before gathering a pile of field stones that had been house foundations and walks. It took him an hour to build a cairn to protect the dead men temporarily, then he turned back to his mount.

To the west lay Buckhorn. He rode without looking back.

Horton had been one of two men he had been instructed to see. But Horton was dead.

A copse of juniper leaned into the wind where the road made a bend and disappeared into a sharp pinched gully between two high rocky ridges. Though the sun was still an hour high above the stony escarpment of the west, Burney Wilkes shivered. To the north and west dirty gray clouds were matted against the peaks. His stomach was empty. For the past hour he had been watching for sign of Buckhorn. And now all he had reached was this road, leading in from nowhere, heading aimlessly the same way.

He turned into it, rounding the junipers, and shivering again as cold wind whipped from the north and west as he entered the narrow gulch.

A voice hailed him. Twe men were sitting their mounts in lee of a rock upthrust.

"Mind if we join you mister?"

Without waiting for a reply they fell in, riding in either side of him. And Wilkes wondered why, and for whom, they had been waiting.

"Buckhorn lies just ahead," the heavier-set of the two said. "Quite a town when you know your way around."

Wilkes kept silent. Both were studying him covertly, as though they had been told of his coming and were trying to verify the description.

"Ain't been there for quite a spell," the other rider commented. "Does Jervis Powell still run the Gold Nugget Saloon?"

It was a flimsy pretense at hiding their quizzing. Wilkes shook his head. Though he had never been to Buckhorn, he said solemnly, "No. Powell died some time back."

The stranger jerked. He stared uncertainly at Wilkes, then questioningly at his companion. Neither seemed to know how best to reopen the questioning. Wilkes kept his face composed and looked straight ahead. His hand was relaxed on his hip, but the fingers were close to his gun.

Without appearing to, he watched the two men. This was just as General Reevis had foreseen—men who would be watching him, and nothing but a slip of the tongue, or a fumbled action would be needed to start them shooting.

WILKES was remembering — the room had been cold when General Reevis had warned him. Dampness had exuded from the planed-plank walls despite the fire and three lamps there where the Missouri twisted through the late spring fog. He, Wilkes, had been so new to Leavenworth that his personal effects had still been unpacked when he had been summoned by the Commanding General. It had tightened the feeling of insecurity that new posts always gave him.

General Reevis himself had not lessened that feeling. He was a dark, squat, dynamic man who seemed pounded into, rather than poured into his uniforms. He was hard-bodied, compressed as though too much strength and energy, too much of bone and fibre were jammed into his short stature. Until a man saw his eyes.

Captain Burney Wilkes was recalling now how those cold, unblinking eyes had looked as he had advanced. His salute had brought only a neglible twist of the General's arm. The C.O. had just watched, and the chill of the river had ascended Wilkes's legs and climbed across his back. No flaw of composure, no weakening of nerve or confidence could escape that critical gaze. Nothing that was the man, whether outer or inner.

The General's voice had been like a burr. "Sit down, Captain. You'll do."

A man sat, but only physically. Sometimes the main part of him remained standing, leaning forward, ready. And the General had waved a hand as though the mere movement of his fingers could create ease.

"You know this horse business," he had

stated bluntly. "You know how things are going with the Confederacy. And you know how badly they need horses." Without raising in pitch, the voice had seemed suddenly to crackle from the very walls. "And by the Eternal, they're getting horses! There's only one answer, Captain, to where the Johnny Rebs are getting them. Copperheads!" His voice had risen angrily then. "If there's anything lower than a Northern sneak who'll turn Copperhead and help out the Confederacy against his own for a few damn dollars—" He had seemed beyond speech. "But they've got to be rooted out!"

Wilkes had rubbed his fingertips against the taut fabric that covered his knees. How long had this been known? How long had it taken to become a certainty? A tip here! A bit of rumor run to earth there! Endless questioning and browbeating and shameless bribing while a route slowly unwound across Texas. Up into the baking flats and broken shale stone of the Territory of New Mexico, west to the badlands of Colorado, slow uncovering of trails down which horses were funneled, destined for J.E.B. Stuart's raiders.

General Reevis's flat, merciless voice had beat into Wilkes's consciousness like an undertone to his thoughts. And the voice had said, "You'll go there—to Buckhorn. Somewhere there amid the broken rocks and the hatreds of citizens who know how to express their loyalty only by fire and knife-thrust and hempen noose the trail has vanished. Somewhere there Carlyle—Major Oscar Llewelyn Carlyle of the Union Army—has vanished."

Burney Wilkes had come to his feet in response to General Reevis's simple "Good luck." And he had been on his way. To Buckhorn, Territory of Colorado, an unshaven, travel-stained nondescript in a slouch hat and wear-slicked pants. No troops at his back to flash sabers at the lift of his hand. No Sharps rifles to volley fire and whiplash the enemy with death. Only nerve and hope—and two names.

Now one already had been crossed off. Horton's!

## CHAPTER II

### *Unfriendly Town*

THE pressure of the two strangers veering closer in upon Wilkes brought his thoughts into sharp focus on the present. The heavy-set man showed broad teeth as he spoke.

"Forgot to mention it, stranger. But I'm Ancil Jaronek. If I can do you a good turn in Buckhorn—There she is, just ahead!"

"Might even have a business proposition," the other rider suggested less cautiously.

The road pitched downward. Wilkes saw the scattering of cabins among the trees in the outskirts, then the buildings of a town following the gulch until trees and sharp slopes pinched it off at the far end.

"If you got time for a palaver—" Jaronek's skinny companion urged.

But Wilkes leaned his horse into the wind. He crouched low over the horn. "Race you to town!" he called, and the wind whipped his words back to the startled pair.

The skinny man's hand dropped to his gun. He drew, but Jaronek yelled something at him, and both began spurring with an urgency not caused by the challenge to race.

Wilkes twisted in the saddle, his laughter for them to see, his narrow-eyed watchfulness of them for himself alone. His lead was short, and his mount was travel-weary, but he kept up a pretense of racing for the sport of it.

Down a slope he went where the road ran straight, lifting dust that fogged away in the wind and was gone. A cabin went by. He saw a rick of wood ready split for a fire. A man came to the front door of the next cabin to stare. Then the town lay ahead and along the street men were turning, watching, drawn by the thunder of racing hooves.

Twisting in the saddle again, Wilkes saw the speed of the two men slackening off. But as the distance between them opened up, he kept his own mount going. He was a hundred yards ahead of Ancil Jaronek and Jaronek's partner, then a hundred and fifty.

"You win, mister!" Jaronek's heavy voice bellowed after him. "That bay of your is faster than it looks."

There was more traffic on the street now, and Wilkes's driving run cut through it like a knife blade. Men twisted and cursed as their mounts skittered. Ponies tied to racks backed and sidled. He twisted to see that Jaronek and the skinny rider were still coming, but slower. Enthusiasm for what probably was their real purpose had been drained out of them at sight of the town and the crowded streets.

When he righted around, Wilkes saw a toadlike, thick-shouldered man standing at the edge of the walk, watching him. As Wilkes was passing, the man lifted his hand. Wilkes reined in.

For a moment the man said nothing, as his bulging eyes ran over Wilkes. Burney Wilkes had half a mind to rein away and start riding. Only this was as far as he was going. Buckhorn. Frontier settlement squatted in a gulch topped by high ridges and black pine.

Wilkes settled back in the saddle and wondered what there had been about that lifted hand that had stopped him.

Jaronek and the skinny man came riding along the street at an easy canter. They saw him, saw the toadlike man with his heavy body and stubby legs. Both horsemen lessened their speed.

"You with them coyotes, mister?" the toadlike man queried.

Wilkes shook his head. The man's empty, fluidy, bulging eyes retracted for a blink, then bulged out again.

"They was after you? You was trying to get away from them?" Eagerness was in the words, a hopefulness that put dark shadows under them.

Wilkes shook his head again.

The heavy man scowled and, without visibly moving, seemed to settle back within himself.

"Be damned! You came the ridge like your tail was afire! And them two so close behind they could count the stitches in your pants! Either you're playing with them or they was hazing you in!"

Jaronek and the skinny man were riding on up the street now. But they twisted in the saddle to look back. Wilkes stared after them until they reined in at a hitch-rail farther on up the street. They crossed the corduroy walk and disappeared into a saloon.

A TAPPING on his knee startled him. He looked down. The toadlike man was close, looking up, not yet angry but with his patience gone.

He growled, "The Town Council here has laws. And I rod them! If you figger to hang your hat up in Buckhorn, you'd be wise to learn that now!"

Wilkes nodded. "I reckon that's a thing to know."

He twisted to stare along the street again. And his attention was drawn to a lithe girl whose swinging skirts emphasized rather than concealed her long legs as she strode along. Her ebony hair was no longer in plaits. The mannish sombrero was gone. But there was no mistaking her—she was the girl from Horton's.

The fingers did not tap his knee this time. They gripped, and dug in, and held like a vise. The pain brought Wilkes's head around.

"You're the law?" he asked sharply.

The man nodded, without answering, without lessening the biting constriction of his powerful fingers.

"There are two dead men east of here, ten-twelve miles." Wilkes brought his bunched knuckles hard against the back of that hand gripping his knee. The fingers jerked spasmodically, releasing their hold. "If you are interested," Wilkes said, "they were shot by night-riders and their place burned out."

The bulging eyes were hooded behind half-lowered lids. The lawman rubbed his bruised hand.

"Who are they?" he rasped challenging,

"Who's buying your horses?" Peabody asked mockingly. "Sarah Rhinegold?"

as though daring the answer to be voiced. And Wilkes thought again, briefly, of General Reevis's foresight.

"I heard the name Horton," he said.

"From who? Who said that name?"

Wilkes shrugged. He let his glance shift enough to note that the girl had disappeared, then it came back to the lawman. He was tired of being held down like a bug on a pin and scrutinized from all sides.

"Who'd you talk to out to Horton's?" the lawman repeated. "By hell, I—"

"Maybe it was Cyrus Peabody."

The lawman blinked. His face changed color. It became ugly and mean, with lips curled thin. His eyes were almost hidden under folds of the dead-color lids. He stared at Wilkes, then said:

"I'm Cyrus Peabody!"

A man gets cold inside, and the knowledge that he has made a bad mistake is almost like a sickness. The taste of it fills his mouth. The shell that is his outer composure sits and grins, while the inside wavers, squirming, wondering how to counter whatever is next to come.

"You mean you wasn't out to Horton's last night?" Wilkes asked blandly.

"You saying I was?"

"No. I ain't saying it."

Peabody rocked forward on his stubby legs. "I ain't saying I was, either!"

Wilkes shrugged. "If you wasn't there, I couldn't hardly of been talking to you, could I?" Peabody didn't answer. Wilkes said, "Somebody ought to look after them dead men—bury them, or something."

"You're interested?"

Wilkes stared down, and the anger inside him put a sharp bite to his voice. The heat of it reddened his face.

"Only in living like a white man, acting like a white man, and being treated like a white man!" he said flatly. "Leaving them fellows out there for varmints to work over ain't hardly civilized!"

Peabody nodded. "You're right. Well Doc Thatcher has got his office over three houses from that corner. He works on the dead as well as the living. You might tell him."

"I'm telling you. You're the law."

Peabody's face wrinkled in a laugh that was all show and no noise. "You're right again, stranger. I'll tell him myself."

Wilkes reined away, feeling Peabody's scrutiny follow him along the street. Outside the store door where he had seen the girl he reined in. Dismounting, he strode inside. But she was gone.

"A young lady was in here a few minutes ago," he told the clerk. "Tall, pretty, black hair—wearing a kinda yellow dress."

"Yeah?"

"Where'd she go?"

THE clerk leaned back, all joviality gone from his face. He looked about the empty store, looked hopefully toward the street door, his gaze finally coming back to Wilkes.

"Mister, I don't know you. I don't know your business. But whatever it is, it ain't mine. I ain't asking no questions and I ain't answering any."

"Damn it, man—" Wilkes forced the annoyance out of his voice. He nodded, saying quietly. "Just wanted to talk with her. But it ain't important enough to—"

The clerk's eyes had roved behind Wilkes and stopped. The clerk moved away with alacrity.

"Morning, Doctor," he greeted. "Was there something?"

Doctor? Maybe Dr. Thatcher? Wilkes turned. A small, waspish-faced man stood behind him. A frail man, neat, chipper as a bird, with eyes bright behind wire-rimmed glasses.

"You're Dr. Thatcher?" Wilkes asked.

The little man nodded, smiling.

"There's two dead men east of here about twelve miles," Wilkes said.

Dr. Thatcher's head bobbed quick and rapid as that of a thrush. "Marshal told me. You are the stranger who found them?"

"I covered them with rocks as best I could," Wilkes said.

"Thoughtful." The head bobbed again. "Some camphor, please, Irey. Mrs. Thatcher's feeling the chill. Spitting mist now, will probably be snow within a day or two."

Through the open door, Wilkes could see a thin woman sitting in a light buggy. The lap robe was drawn high. Her fragile features were without color, transparent. The doctor's voice came to him.

"Horton's, you say?"

Wilkes turned. "I didn't say."

Dr. Thatcher's bright birdlike eyes speared him. "Who did say it, then?"

Wilkes shrugged. "I wouldn't know Horton from any man on the street. I'm new here."

Dr. Thatcher weighed his words, thinking. He nodded again. "I'll make arrangements. We'll find a place."

The clerk shoved a small bottle across the plank counter. The doctor picked it up, nodded pleasantly, and left. At the door he stepped aside. Peabody came in.

"Be in town a few days?" Peabody asked Wilkes. "Might want to talk to you later."

Wilkes nodded. "Till I sell my horses. And I ain't likely to snap up the first offer I get."

Peabody scratched his nose more thoughtfully, twisted to stare out along the street. His thick, heavy body sagged back and settled down as though time and hurry meant nothing. The clerk moved away from Wilkes, pretending to work.

Through the door, and across the street, Wilkes saw Jaronek and his skinny friend walk by. Jaronek was smoking a cigar.

Peabody, too, was watching them, his bulging eyes sinking back beneath half-lowered lids.

On impulse, Wilkes asked, "Know them two?"

"Jaronek and Whitsdale?" Peabody turned to stare at Wilkes, a cold calculating stare that slowly sharpened. "Don't try making jokes! The company you're keeping ain't a joking matter in this town!"

"They ain't my company! I've told you that. I'm new here."

Peabody eyed Wilkes for a long moment of derision. "We'll soon know," he said, and turned his glance again toward the street. Toward the men he had called Jaronek and Whitsdale.

Wilkes knew that in Peabody's mind he was linked with that pair. Whatever Peabody believed them to be, whatever it was he hoped to do to them or see done, now included him. Unquestionably this small town marshal was the type of man of whom General Reevis had spoken—the blind, fanatical, ignorant loyalist whose only idea of his duty to the Union embraced the use of gun, knife and noose. To kill in the dark, without a chance for life or pleading, anyone his own petty mind told him was aligned with the Copperhead cause.

Wilkes seemed to smell again the sharp bite of pine logs, of home and outbuildings gone in the night.

## CHAPTER III

### *Missing Man*

A FLUSTER of wind raised sudden sharp dust along the street. Rain mouthed at the window, leaving drop patterns against the dusty film on the glass. There was more of wind, a louder, stonier rattle of rain. The light dulled so that gloom flooded into the store and made the back of it a vague, shadowy blankness.

Peabody turned heavily. "Might warn you," he told Wilkes, "that there was another feller around here selling horses some months back. He wouldn't listen too much, either. He didn't fetch up so well."

Carlyle! Wilkes cried out silently, Major Oscar Llewelyn Carlyle!

In the half-darkness, Peabody's bulging eyes seemed to float in oily liquid. Wilkes, saying nothing, waited. Those eerie, half-closed eyes held him mesmerized.

"I'll be down the street any time you want to drop in and powwow," Peabody said pointedly. "Might be we could be friends. I got my faults like anybody else. But I got friends, too. Ain't I, Irey?"

"Lots of friends, Mr. Peabody," the store clerk agreed readily. "Just lots of friends."

The store seemed suddenly to be smotheringly close. Wilkes felt the store clerk's eyes upon him. Peabody's scrutiny was holding him fast. The wind boomed a gusty deep-drawn sucking sound, and he remembered his horse tied to the rail outside. The thought came to him that with this storm building the way it was nobody would be going out to Horton's for the bodies.

At least he knew they *were* bodies! With Carlyle, he didn't know—yet!

Leaving the store, Wilkes bowed his head and swore softly. The wind had an icy edge that cut deep into a man's flesh. Already the rain was as biting as birdshot where it slashed at exposed surfaces.

He got his horse and rode farther up the gulch. Seeing no sign of a livery stable he turned back, stopping at a grease-smelling cafe to ask directions. The answer was flung at him by a man who didn't bother to look around. Wilkes turned back into the storm.

Following the cafe man's direction he rode over an uncertain stretch of road that skirted a clump of trees, then veered left again. Pole corrals marked the livery barn. Wilkes rode inside, ducking to get through the low door.

Inside, a man was harnessing a team to a buckboard. He canted his head to peer upward. A ragged bandanna roped his sombrero down about his ears like a woman's bonnet.

"Getting cold," Wilkes said.

"You didn't ride in here to tell me that!"

The testiness made Wilkes grin. "Nope, Pop. I want to board my horse for a while."

"How long?"

"Week—two weeks. Maybe longer."

The oldster grunted. "Pay in advance. Maybe you won't stay long as you think."

Wilkes slid down, shivering in the unaccustomed chill.

"Turn him in the corral," the oldster snapped . "They's cover if it snows. Hay regular—grain costs extra."

Wilkes unsaddled and turned his horse into the corral. When he came back, lugging his saddle and blanket, the oldster had finished the harnessing. A slender, fragile little man was with him. Wilkes recognized Dr. Thatcher, and was as quickly recognized himself. The doctor nodded pleasantly and turned to leave the barn.

Wilkes called to him. "You take care of all the dead in this neighborhood, Doctor? Is that right?"

Thatcher's wire-rimmed glasses bobbled.

"Just some of them. The rest—" He shrugged.

"How about a stranger who was here trying to sell some horses a few months back?"

Thatcher bowed his head in thought. Behind them, one of the harnessed team stomped impatiently.

"I—I'm sorry," Dr. Thatcher said slowly. "I can't recall at the moment. But if you would care to call at my office, I may have some record of it."

WILKES started to turn away. The peckish liveryman was standing close behind him. A fork was gripped in the oldster's one good hand, the handle laying across the forearm of the other. What should have been a normal left hand was nothing but a knobbed red stump.

"Try to get as far as you can tonight, Ben," Dr. Thatcher said to him. "The sooner you reach Horton's the less chance wolves will have."

The oldster hesitated. "I don't know, Doc. This jasper—"

"You'd better hurry, Ben."

The liveryman turned back into the darkness of the barn.

Dr. Thatcher stepped closer to Wilkes, a shifting shadow in the evening gloom.

"If you'd care to ride with me," he invited, "I've a rig outside."

The doctor's thin fingers found his arm. Wilkes allowed himself to be led outside where he climbed into the buggy beside the little doctor.

After Dr. Thatcher had turned his team and whipped it into a trot, he leaned back. "You must find Buckhorn a strange town, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Wilkes."

"Mr. Wilkes. All the suspicion and distrust you run into".

Wilkes shrugged.

"We found it so at first, the wife and I. But in the year that we've been here, we've grown accustomed to it."

Wilkes shrugged again. Dr. Thatcher was a friendly little soul, but something of a bore. He tried to imagine their first reaction, the doctor and his sick wife, to people like Peabody, or Jaronek and Whitsdale.

Night had fallen, so windows stood sharply etched with orange-yellow lamplight. Men still strode the walks on both sides of main street seemingly inured to the chill wind and biting sleet which Wilkes found increasingly uncomfortable.

Somewhere along that street, the men who sided Cyrus Peabody in raiding Horton's ranch were walking. His eye followed one man along the walk until a breaking open of light marked the man's entrance into a saloon. The Gold Nugget Saloon, the sign said.

Wilkes shifted. "I'll get out here," he said and thanks for the ride."

"Here?" Dr. Thatcher seemed startled. "I thought maybe—" He reined in the team, waited until Wilkes had climbed

down. "Maybe some other time I can look through my records for that friend of yours."

Hunched and miserable in the cold, Wilkes tried to make out the doctor's face.

"He wasn't a friend of mine" he said.

The doctor looked surprised. "Then how'd you know about him? If you just arrived in Buckhorn today."

"Peabody told me."

"Peabody!"

Something of the doctor's agitation came to Wilkes through the cold and windy night. He waited, trying to seine some meaning or reason for it from the doctor's expression. But he could make out nothing.

The doctor chirruped to his horse. Wilkes, left standing there, looked after the buggy. The cold gnawed at his back. Sleet cut against his neck. He turned finally toward the lights and promised warmth of the Gold Nugget Saloon. Inside he found it.

The whisky glowed in his belly like a molten rock. Then it became fluid and washed through him, driving out the chill and misery. He began to feel better. With a second whisky in his hand he turned idly to scan the crowd.

Bearded, shaven, weathered — some homely, some passable. Northern faces or southern? Who could tell? Wilkes had noted that before. A man was a man, a stone shaken up in a handful of stones. But at no one could he point and say with certainty, "there is a Northerner whose sympathies lie with the Rebels!" "There one rides with Cyrus Peabody!" Or the Copperheads. Or could the two be synonomous?

A man sauntered over and leaned against the bar beside Wilkes. He turned and looked into the grinning countenance of Jaronek.

"I'll stand one, stranger," Jaronek said.

"Why?"

Jaronek laughed—with his lips. "Care-

[*Turn page*]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ful as hell, ain't you? Well, drink or don't drink, I ain't pushing you."

JARONEK turned his shoulder. Wilkes considered accepting the drink, then shoved it from his mind. Whoever Jaronek was, whatever he wanted, he would try again. There was too much of coincidence in their meetings for it to be happenstance alone.

His glance ranged the saloon. Not an overly big place, but well patronized. Maybe half a dozen women were scattered among the crowd. Two men were behind the bar, another serving the tables. .

Abruptly Wilkes lowered his whisky glass to the bar top At a far table he saw a girl—the girl! Her glance met his, and he realized that she had been watching him. She looked down.

Wilkes glanced about the saloon again, then crossed to her table. She showed no alarm at his approach. When she looked up, her dark eyes were warm. Her shoulders were bare, the bodice of her dress such that Wilkes knew what she was doing in the saloon.

"Sit down," she invited. "It might as well be you as anybody."

The indifference rocked Wilkes's ego. "Just anybody will do, huh?" he asked.

She looked at him. "If they've got money."

"Even Cyrus Peabody?"

She flinched as though he'd struck her. The color drained from her face, leaving it pinched and bloodless. Only her lips retained a rich, soft warmth that came of paint artfully applied. Hatred flamed in her eyes as she glared at him.

"Sit down," she whispered. "Sit down and give me a chance to poison your drink! Or to run a knife into your belly! Just give me a chance at you!"

Wilkes grinned. He took the chair opposite her and stared. She looked away. Looking for help, he guessed. Probably finding it. Then she was facing him again.

"You told Peabody I was at Hortons!"

Wilkes shook his head.

"You did! The first thing you did when you hit town was look him up!"

The girl was watching him, searching his face with each word she uttered. Trying to arouse anger, or confusion, which would permit her to see through him.

He shook his head. "I don't like nightriders any better than you do. I've only got your word for it that Peabody is heading up a bunch of them, but anyway he put the clamps on me. I didn't look him up," Wilkes grinned at her. "Now—you want to dance? Or do we start all over?"

She got to her feet. Lithe, slender, altogether desirable. Wilkes sought for a hint of the coarseness, the shadow of hardness which were the marks of her profession, but sought in vain. She was young, fresh and beautfiul as any sheltered daughter of Maryland or Illinois or Vermont. An incongruity he found delightful.

He followed her toward a tiny square of cleared floor space where two other couples were dancing to a jangling piano. His glance cut back. Jaronek was watching. Pleased with something that Wilkes suddenly feared. He flung a quick glance toward the girl. But she was oblivious to Jaronek's presence.

She came into Wilkes's arms at edge of the tiny square floor space. Warmly soft. Wakening impulses that made his blood race.

"Honey," he said, "we're going to get along."

Her eyes met his. "Sell your horses and get out of town."

He laughed. "I'll sell my horses—but I'll be in no hurry to leave. Not now."

They danced, and as he whirled her about he saw Jaronek's satisfied stare following them.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Wilkes Shows His Hand*

THE wind blew loud, reaching a crescendo that intruded and became an obbligato to the saloon noise. Jaronek moved away from the bar. Wilkes tried

to follow him with his eyes as he moved in the steps of the dance—but Jaronek was gone.

Smoke and noise! Dance and drink! Too little food in days past, too little sleep, too much liquor now. Dance again, drink again. Wilkes felt the lightness in his legs. The sharp edges of his mind blurred, his anxiety about Jaronek melted away.

He looked down at the girl in his arms and laughed. Somehow he had learned that her name was Sarah Rhinegold, that she had a cabin in the lower part of town, that she lived alone. He held her tight, inhaling the incense of her ebony hair. And always he knew that what he held, and felt, and warmed to, was only her body. The inner part of her, the real woman part, she held aloof and distant—untouched and ungiving.

But maybe — Wilkes felt his blood stream race. She had a cabin, and lived alone. Her eyes invited. His fingers tightened about her arm—and then he saw Jaronek again. Jaronek, who had been waiting for him on the road below town! Maybe one of the Copperhead gang, which, under cover, infested this country which was supposed to be strictly northern. Maybe a night rider with torch and gun!

Jaronek. The toadlike Cyrus Peabody. Horton now dead, and Carlyle—

"Drink," he told the girl, and, pulling away from her, strode across the saloon floor and out into the night.

A man was standing outside, watching the saloon crowd through the window. A gross, heavy-bodied man. Bulging eyes and a thin crooked smile were turned on Wilkes as he stopped abruptly.

The night was suddenly colder—far too cold.

"Who's buying your horses?" Peabody asked mockingly. "Sarah Rhinegold?"

Hatred leaped into Wilkes, hatred so fearful and wild he had trouble holding it back. The flush of liquor gripped him. He stared at Peabody, stared and hated and drew deep draughts of cold air into his overheated chest. The haziness left, but he still felt all-powerful, all-wise; and he knew how drunk he was. Maybe even dangerously drunk. A man could never be sure of himself when he felt so masterful.

"You find who burned out Horton?" he asked the marshal. "Or does that interest you?"

Peabody's eyes disappeared beneath pouchy, overhanging lids. He peered at Wilkes. But strangely, he did not flare up.

Another man came up the walk. A stranger to Wilkes. The man stopped beside Peabody. Peabody's scrutiny of Wilkes caught the man's attention. He, too stood watching, waiting.

"This him?" the man said finally.

Peabody nodded. He said harshly, "A drifter. Says he has horses to sell. Maybe like that other one did."

The strange man stirred uncomfortably. "We got to watch out," he explained to Wilkes, half apologetically, half defiantly. "Too many no-goods drifting into town these days. Then killings and robberies and all kinds of trouble breaks out."

"And home burning!" Wilkes added.

Peabody's retort snapped back, "And damned Copperheads come in and gang up on us!"

The other man shifted again and shook his head. "Easy, Cy. Maybe this gent is all right. No use suspecting every stranger who rides in of being a Copperhead spy. We don't know anything about him yet."

"Then hand him a gun and let him prove which side he's on! Tell him how to reach Benjamin's place!" Peabody's thick body swelled with an urge that seemed to puff him even bigger. "Let him beef a few of the damned traitors he'll run into there—Oh, I know they're there all right, just been too cagey to get caught—yet. When he's thrown a little lead in the right places, then we can say he's all right."

The stranger repeated, "Easy, Cy."

The two men stood looking at Wilkes as if uncertain that too much hadn't been said. Uncertain as to what he might say or do.

A vision of Horton's bullet-riddled body rose before his mind. He thought of Carlyle, journeying hopefully toward Buck-

horn to hun down the Copperheads who were the hidden enemies of the Union Army in which he served—and finding oblivion. Now it was to be Burney Wilkes! Wilkes was to go like a man named Horton!

HE STARED back at the two men. Here were townsmen who saw a threat to the Union all out of proportion, who wanted to stamp it out, men who would let their passions magnify and distort. Fanatical, merciless Cyrus Peabody. This strange man who urged caution and moderation, but who practiced—what?

"Did you give that other horse seller a chance to burn out the men *you* thought were Copperheads?" Derision was edging Wilkes's voice. And hatred that was open and virulent. "Or did you just kill him because you were afraid he wouldn't?"

Peabody didn't answer. The other man said, "He fell against a butcher knife in Pat Heeley's cafe. The knife was sticking out over the counter edge. The handle caught on a rough place in the counter and wouldn't slide. That was an accident."

Accident! Like Horton's death was an accident! And what now was slated for the man Peabody called Benjamin! Wilkes knew without being told. As he also knew that somewhere, somehow, Peabody's cohorts—had become suspicious of Carlyle. Or afraid of him. It could have been that he was about to charge them with the stigma of being Copperheads themselves—they who were so self-righteous, openly declaring for death to all Copperheads, or whoever might be suspected of being. But in the silent watches, what—in actuality?

"We'll be late for the meeting, Cy," the townsman who had been questioning Wilkes said. "We'd better hurry or we'll be too late."

Peabody tilted his head in the light that came through the saloon window. "Later, stranger," he said to Wilkes. "We'll talk again."

Wilkes watched them move away. And knew that his stay in Buckhorn was about over. Peabody was suspicious of him, believing undoubtedly that he was to get in touch with men who wanted horses for the Confederate Army. And by tomorrow, in Peabody's cruel, twisted mind, that might have become a certainty.

Had they been certain about Horton? Probably no more than they had been about Carlyle! Just suspicious—and fanatical.

The realization drummed within him that tomorrow would be too late for him to do what he had come here to accomplish. By tomorrow what was called the law in this country would itself have stymied him. Now—tonight! Make the play recklessly, and drive hard.

So he turned back inside the Gold Nugget the tail-end of a fragment of a Biblical quotation came to mind—"for tomorrow you die."

Jaronek was still at the bar. And Whitsdale. Wilkes crossed toward them.

"I'll take that drink, Jaronek," he said. "And I'll tell you this. That lawman of yours in this town keeps riding me, he gonna wake up dead!"

Jaronek studied him briefly, without surprise. "Peabody?"

"That slug-bellied big-wind that stopped me this afternoon."

Whitsdale nodded, and grinned like a starved wolf. "That's Peabody. He's riding you, you say? Why?"

Wilkes did not answer. Jaronek poured a drink for Wilkes and he downed it. The fever of too much liquor already was in his face. He knew both men saw it when he saw them exchange glances. Whitsdale suddenly laughed and clapped Wilkes across the shoulders.

Jaronek was pouring another drink. Pouring and grinning and shoving it along the bar with the back of one thick-fleshed finger. Wilkes shook his head. Jaronek's grin held steady. And Wilkes felt Whitsdale leaning against him.

"Damn me, mister," Whitsdale's voice came to his ear, "if I had me a herd of horses and could get hard cash for them, by Christopher, I'd sell!"

Whitsdale must be drunker than he had realized, Wilkes thought. Or the two believed he was drunker than he was.

He said, "Gold ain't everything. Had offers of gold—hard yellow gold. But I told them—" He stopped abruptly, as though suddenly wary.

Jaronek's thick lips peeled away from his square teeth. "Maybe it's the idea of selling to somebody that'll turn your horses over to Grant's bullboys that you don't like? Is that it, Wilkes?"

Reading Jaronek's eyes was like trying to read flint. Or dirty window glass. They revealed nothing, betrayed nothing. Wilkes scowled and shook his head.

WHITSDALE twisted his hawkish face in a wide smile. He leaned closer.

"Maybe," he whispered, "you'd rather see them broomtails of yours trailed south?"

Triumph flooded into Wilkes—and was gone. This was coming too fast. Too easily. They were baiting him. He pushed himself clear of the bar.

"Maybe I would!" he shouted. "Maybe I'd like to see my horses trampling down every bluejacket between here and the Delaware River! But that's my business, ain't it?"

Saloon noise cut off as though chopped with a knife.

Whitsdale's hawkish face went white. Jaronek's mouth tightened and both quickly backed away from him. Twisting around with his hands close to his guns, Wilkes watched the crowd while the silence became solid and tortured.

If he hadn't known it before, Wilkes knew then the grim deadliness of the rift that was splitting the town. Deadly as the enmity on any battlefield to the east, differing only in that on the field a man knew who his enemy was—and who the friend.

Through a rift in the crowd he caught a glimpse of Sarah Rhinegold. Her eyes were wide. The soft painted oval of her mouth began framing words he could not make out. She shook her head at him, and then the crowd closed her off from his sight.

"Get out of here, you damned fool!" Jaronek muttered tersely. "You want to get us all killed?"

Wilkes began a laugh. But seeing the faces of men watching him, he felt it shrivel and die. He turned quickly, headed for the door, and out. Again he had blundered. To men loyal to the North, bitter against the South, he had marked himself. Peabody needed only to hear of this now to go into action.

The wind was as sharp as a new cleaver against his nostrils. He dragged it deep into his lungs. Dragged again and again until some of the throb left his temples. He faced into it, staring up a street lined with saloon dives and bawdy houses and cribs. Wind whipped sounds past him. He caught a fragment of music. A bit of laughter. And then all was gone and he was alone. And afraid.

Loneliness touched him so painfully that he shivered and wondered why fate had singled him out for the role. Back inside the Gold Nugget was warmth and liquor. Sarah Rhinegold was there. Why was he, Burney Wilkes, alone, surrounded by enemies and hatred? Marked for death! Why had fate made him this instead of a

*Sagebrush Sam Says:*

**Love is a good deal like calf-ropin': the quicker the ketch, the easier the tie.**

nondescript hanger-on of the saloon? Careless laughter, the easy love of a girl like Sarah Rhinegold, irresponsibility.

He shook his head, told himself, "You're drunk, damn you! Quit your crying. You knew what the game was when you stepped into it."

Only he hadn't. No man fully knew until the final situation unfolded around him and revealed his ignorance in the instant that preceded death.

The quick instinctive frenzy of combat that had been his life with the Pennsylvania Volunteers was one thing; a clean, unthinking rush that carried a man along and deposited him after battle with the breath of life still within him. Or it left him dead somewhere along a skirmish line. But here death lurked in the shadows, probing with an uncertain finger, taunting, waiting, merciless.

Snow began slicing the wind. He was fast sobering, growing more aware of the declaration he had made in the Gold Nugget. If Jaronek and Whitsdale were baiting him for Peabody, then he would have to let everybody know who he was, in order to stay alive. If they gave him the chance. He wondered if Jaronek and Whitsdale were Copperheads, or maybe just frontier ruffians on the trail of horses to steal for themselves.

A glow of light marked saloon windows ahead, and Wilkes moved toward it. Nobody had followed him from the Gold Nugget. Either Jaronek and Whitsdale were holding everybody back or no man wanted to betray himself and prove where his allegiance lay by rushing out.

Wilkes fumbled at the batwing doors, then stepped inside a place called the Concord. It was less crowded than the Nugget had been. But the air was worse—soupy with smoke and a stale acrid stench. He crossed to the nearest table and sagged down into a chair. A huge clock ticked over the backbar. He sat staring at it, wondering how long it would be before word of what he had shouted in the Nugget would reach here.

Maybe, he thought, Carlyle had wondered the same thing. Wondered and waited as he was waiting now—and died.

HE LEANED back in his chair and began tamping tobacco into his pipe. A high-breasted, loose-hipped woman came to the table and slid into a chair beside him. Her gown was cut low, straps no wider than his thumb giving the only covering to her full breasts.

"You look lonesome, mister," she said. "Maybe you need a friend."

Wilkes scowled. He looked at her and saw Sarah Rhinegold in ten years. The thought angered him, struck a sensitive spot and hurt.

"Get your drink at the bar," he said curtly. "I'm busy."

The woman did not move. She studied him. Leaned forward so that the narrow straps wavered.

"Honey—"

Wilkes swore, and twisted toward her—and saw Whitsdale's thin hawkish face. Whitsdale had evidently entered from the rear. Now he was ambling across the floor flicking his glance this way and that. Wilkes grabbed the woman's wrist.

"Maybe you're just what I need!" he said.

He tugged at her wrist and she flowed against him like a current of hot water, pressing close. Across her bare shoulder, Wilkes watched Whitsdale's slow approach to his table.

"Le's drink!" Wilkes cried in a loud voice. "I got horses—lots of horses. Le's drink!"

## CHAPTER V

### *Death Test of Loyalty*

HEARING that voice, Whitsdale spun around. Recognition came into the hawkish brown face. Then Whitsdale was looking toward the front door, nodding. And Wilkes knew without turning that Ancil Jaronek was now inside the Concord Saloon.

"You know, baby," Wilkes murmured to the blonde, "you and me could get along fine. We could—"

He knew when Whitsdale and Jaronek reached the table. The blonde did, too. She stiffened. Her voice shrilled stridently at the men:

"G'wan! Get away from here! There's plenty other tables for you!"

Whitsdale swore. Then Jaronek's cold voice said to her:

"Go pick yourself another touch, kid. We got business with this gent."

The blonde jeered, "What business? G'wan and—"

"Climb your horse, sister!" Jaronek's voice was suddenly chill as ice.

Reluctantly she pulled away from Wilkes. He twisted around, scowled up at the pair.

"Here." Jaronek flipped a double eagle toward the blonde. "You can take it up with him when we get through."

She snorted through nostrils pinched with anger. But she grabbed the coin out of mid-air. Jaronek dropped into the chair she vacated. Whitsdale remained standing.

"Damn butt-ins!" Wilkes fumed. "I about had that babe talked into—"

Whitsdale laughed, "Hell, she'd go for a quarter. And if you lacked the cash, she'd extend a little credit."

Wilkes twisted to stare after the woman. Jaronek's fingers on his shoulder turned him back. Heavy fingers, capable of snapping a man's spine or twisting his neck like an aspen bough. He bunched his shoulder.

Jaronek leaned forward. "You got a big bunch of horses all ready to drive, is that right?"

Play it cautious! Easy. Stare with hostility and suspicion at first one and then the other. Pretend to get up. Pretend surprise and anger and wariness when Jaronek holds you back. Cautious—wary, like a man whose secret has been found out.

"How much for those horses, Wilkes?" Jaronek whispered. "Raw Colorado gold?"

"No!" Wilkes shook his head, half-shouting. "I told that Union Army buyer at Fort Simpson, and I'm telling you—"

Jaronek heaved to his feet. He stood glaring down, one thick hand riding the butt of his pistol.

"Maybe," he said pointedly, "those horses wouldn't have to go to Grant's bullyboys. You ever consider that?"

Wilkes forced a laugh. "Yeah, and maybe I could fly if I jumped off a cliff. But I ain't gonna take a chance finding out."

Jaronek grinned, but without humor. "Oh, we can convince you, all right. The thing of it is—will you be able to convince us?"

"That I got horses?"

Jaronek shook his head. A look passed between the two men, a look that was a silent message, asked mute questions. Answers were arrived at, for Jaronek's hand was suddenly on Wilkes's shoulder and he was hoisted to his feet.

"Hey!" he yelled. "This ain't no way—"

Neither man answered him. Jaronek's elbow knifed backward sharply, catching Wilkes in the solar plexus. And while he bent double in an agonized struggle for breath, they boxed him between them, moving toward the door supporting his writhing frame. It was done as casually as any two friends aiding a third who has had too much to drink.

Outside, they moved quickly away from the window glow and stood waiting while Wilkes gradually got his paralyzed diaphragm to pumping breath again.

"You — dirty — sons!" he managed finally.

Whitsdale laughed.

"You know what has been happening to Copperheads in this country?" Jaronek said brusquely.

Wilkes nodded. That neither could see his nod did not occur to him.

"Well, it ain't always been Northerners who used the knife on 'em, mister!" Jaronek's voice boomed at. "Keep remembering that! Sometimes a man forgets who he is working for, or maybe the money looks better on the other side of the fence! When that happens—"

He did not need to finish.

"Like Horton?" Wilkes asked.

"No, that was Peabody's work, damn his twisted little soul!" Fury was sharp as honed steel in Jaronek's voice. "We know he pulled that one! And we know how to fix his little wagon! Just—" Jaronek broke off abruptly.

WILKES shivered as from sudden chill. Whitsdale prodded him, and when Wilkes turned, Jaronek was gone.

"Follow him," Whitsdale whispered. "I'm fetching up behind."

Wilkes hesitated. And Whitsdale's impatient shove sent him floundering.

"Move, damn it! You want to sell horses, then move!"

Then move. In file like wolves. A narrow, twisting stretch of alley, tracks that enter and leave a corpse of drumming cedars. Turn, twist, dodge. Cross open flats where the wind smashes solid as a punky club. In black lee of unseen buildings, the blizzard screaming invisible torrents of vehemence far overhead. Walk and walk and find no rest, no end of it. "Move, damn you! You want to sell horses!"

Wilkes's lungs ached. His legs dragged woodenly. And still Jaronek kept walking, circling, prowling the back streets and alleys of Buckhorn, the trail crossing and recrossing.

"Where in hell we going?" Wilkes demanded finally. "I been lost the past hour and walked enough to be damned nigh to Denver was the path laid out in line."

There was no answer. Snow-thickened wind whooped away his words. Then Jaronek veered again.

They were in the lee of a high frame building. Wilkes tried to see where he was, tried to make out some object nearby. But spindrift snow whirled spirals about him, blinding him.

"I'm froze," he complained. "If this is some crazy joke—" He twisted to grumble more to Whitsdale. But Whitsdale was gone.

"Where's Whitsdale?" Wilkes barked at Jaronek.

Jaronek remained silent, a hunched figure that seemed far distant though he stood but feet away. Wilkes grumbled a little more and fell silent. He wondered if Carlyle had gone this far down the trail they were seeking? Or had—

Jaronek's hand on his shoulder broke his thoughts.

Jaronek was shoving him ahead, around the edge of the building into the storm. On around until they were on opposite side from where Whitsdale had deserted them. Here a tall mound of loose bluestem hay was roped down to keep it from blowing away. Despite the wind and cold, Wilkes could whiff the spicy odor. A figure stirred near them. Whitdale's voice came.

Then Whitsdale was leading. They moved along the side of the hay pile. Inexplicably, there was a slot-like opening in the seemingly solid pile. Whitsdale shoved him into it. Wilkes fumbled blindly, feeling rough boards that made sides to a crude tunnel that extended back through the hay. The roar of the blizzard was gone. Only the rasp of breathing came to him. He tried to recollect where in Buckhorn he had seen an old barn with a huge pile of hay mounded against its north wall.

"G-wan!" Jaronek said at his elbow. "Keep going."

They kept going—blindly, fumblingly feeling through darkness and unease. And then there was light ahead.

The tunnel turned and opened into a huge room. Lights were here, and a glowing stove. Some fifteen or twenty men stood watching the arrivals. Wilkes stopped. He knew without meeting the cold hostility of each pair of eyes that here in this barn was the secret meeting place of the Buckhorn Copperheads. And they had allowed him to learn of it because—

He forced his mind away from speculation.

Even dapper Dr. Thatcher was present, Wilkes noted with surprise. The thought came to him that the doc's wife would be shocked if she knew the company he was

keeping. Wilkes nodded to him, but Thatcher's lean bony face did not soften.

Wilkes thought probably afraid to admit he has ever seen me before.

Then Jaronek was shoving him farther into the big barn.

"He's threatening to salivate Cy Peabody," Jaronek announced. "And in the Gold Nugget he talked a heap about using his horses to trample bluejackets. I reckon he—"

"Shut up, Jaronek!" Wilkes was surprised to hear prim little Dr. Thatcher snap at Jaronek.

Jaronek's voice broke in mid-air. A startled understanding began growing within Wilkes. He shuffled his cold feet, covertly studying the little man whose piping voice commanded such instant obedience. Up to his skinny neck in the scheming, he decided. Maybe a local leader or something. He saw the doctor's pale eyes through their shiny globs of spectacles. Cold eyes. No, hot eyes! Molten eyes.

"Where are your horses now, Wilkes?" Thatcher asked.

MUTELY Wilkes shook his head. Thatcher scowled. The beaked nose and thin bloodless lips turned toward Jaronek, toward Whitsdale.

Whitsdale cut in hurriedly, "He's drunk. We was figurin' to question him. But when he shouted out in the Gold Nugget how he hated the North—well, there was enough Yankee-lovers in there to scalp us all. We grabbed him and lit a shuck before the men could get saddled. Oh, he's our boy, all right. Just shine a little gold under his nose and he'll come into it whole hog."

The cold-hot eyes swiveled back. Wilkes swayed, to appear more drunk than he felt. Men spread in a half circle, beyond the doctor, watched. Suspicious men, men whose dangerous activities kept them on edge and alert, wary.

Dr. Thatcher murmured something to one of them. The man hurried away. Wilkes felt cold sweat break out. He stared at Thatcher.

"Did the wagon get back from Horton's, Doctor?" he inquired innocently.

Nobody answered. Nobody moved. They seemed frozen solid, motionless, a portion of a grim bloodless tableau etched against the backdrop of a huge old barn. The quicksand gripped Wilkes, holding him—a gaunt, stupid figure whose writhing anxiety was only on the inside.

Then the back of the half circle moved. A man was shoved through. Bloody-faced, arms bound in front of him. Wilkes stared in unbelief and horror, while the breath bunched and stopped in his throat, as he recognized the captive. And was sick.

"Ever see this man before, Wilkes?" Dr. Thatcher snapped.

Dumbly, Wilkes shook his head.

He hadn't known that Dade Hocumb was anywhere near Buckhorn. How long ago was it? How many months since he and Dade, under Major Hannibal Davis, had been tracing Secesh horse movements

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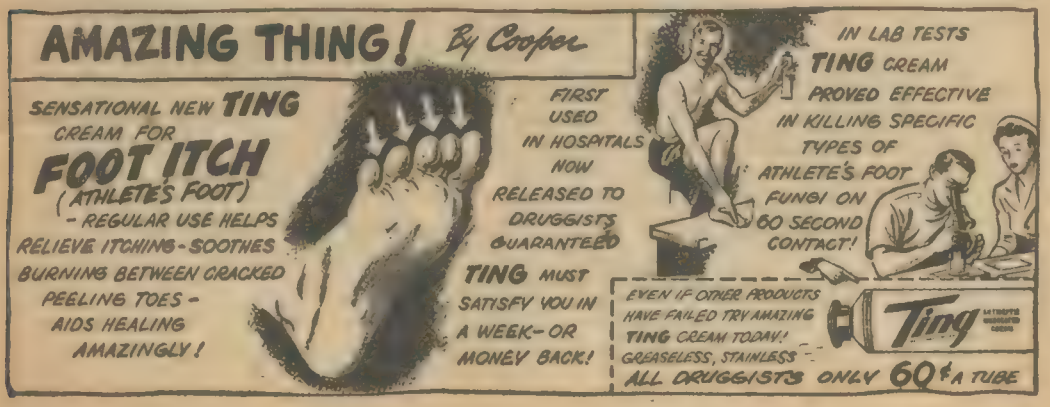
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out of Tres Lordes and Rio Cuchillo in lower New Mexico Territory? Then a stir of hope whipped him. Maybe, if Dade Hocumb was in Buckhorn, Major Davis and his detachment of Union soldiers were not too far distant?

Thatcher's voice was slyly malicious. "You're staring at him, Mr. Wilkes. Do you find his features familiar?"

Wilkes scarcely heard him. One of Hocumb's ears was a mangled stub. Pain glazed his eyes until he appeared drugged.

Thatcher's voice was mild. "If you don't know him, then you'll have no compunction about killing him! He's a Union spy!"

This little doctor's eyes were watching Wilkes, probing, digging, searching. Sly mockery was in the doctor's face, and challenge. To fumble this Wilkes realized, would be to share Dade Hocumb's jeopardy.

"You can prove your sympathy with the Confederacy," Dr. Thatcher pointed out. "We'll buy your entire herd of horses. Jaronek, leave one load in his gun!"

Wilkes felt his heart sink. Involuntarily he flicked a quick glance toward Hocumb. Hocumb's chin was up, his back straight. He met Wilkes's glance without show of recognition.

"Maybe you'd like to talk, Lieutenant?" Thatcher asked Hocumb. "I know who you are and why you are in Buckhorn. I know that Major Hannibal Davis is awaiting a report from you before bringing his soldiers into town. And I know there are two more Union spies in Buckhorn. Tell me their names, Lieutenant Hocumb, and I'll promise you safety as our prisoner of war."

Hocumb's blood-stained features twisted. His broken lips parted slightly. "Go to hell, Copperhead!"

Thatcher's bony face tightened. "I'll know, anyway, within a matter of hours!" he shrilled. "You think only the Union Army has an Intelligence Service? You stupid, proud—Jaronek! Give Wilkes that gun!"

The cold butt of a gun was shoved into fingers equally cold. Half a dozen Copperheads drew guns to forestall trickery. A lane opened behind Hocumb. Storm boomed against the roof shakes. And Wilkes felt his jaws slime with perspiration.

Refuse,, and he would join Hocumb in death. Proving nothing, gaining nothing. The Copperhead band would disperse like vapor. Dr. Thatcher would complain about the brutality of the town, and about his dying wife. Horses would keep moving to the Confederacy. And other Union agents would find their names and missions known before ever they arrived in Buckhorn to die.

Cocking the gun with fingers gone clumsy, Wilkes took a lurching step toward Hocumb.

"You dirty stinking spy!" he cried, and fired!

## CHAPTER VI

### *Supreme Sacrifice*

HOCUMB flinched as the slug ripped his already ruined ear. Blood gushed fresh, shining in the guttering lantern light.

"Damn him!" Wilkes bawled. "He moved. Give me another shell, Jaronek! This time I'll—"

A stall! A desperate play for time! But for what? Maybe to put the next bullet into Thatcher? Or into Jaronek?

Dade Hocumb suddenly yelled and kicked out. He whirled and dived toward the watching Copperheads. Wilkes stood transfixed, eyes on the flailing arms. Hocumb kicked and butted, using his bound arms as a club. And then, somehow, in a hand at the end of those bound arms was a gun that had been grasped and wrenched free. Hocumb started to whirl.

A shot rapped out, and Hocumb staggered. But he held his feet. A second gun was fired. This shot brought Hocumb to his knees. Even then he was trying to lift the gun he had snatched. He kept

on trying until a dozen shots riddled him, firing up until he was sprawled lifelessly.

It had been murder, cold and brutal. And it had been sacrifice. Hocumb had given his life deliberately, had forced the Copperheads to kill him, giving Wilkes whatever slim benefit his death afforded.

The tumult slowly died down. A man stepped forward to spit on the dead Union agent, and Wilkes marked him mentally. Some day, he promised silently, that little deed would bear fruit.

He wiped his mouth with a palm. Dr. Thatcher was watching him speculatively.

"You deliberately missed that shot!" the doctor charged.

Wilkes protested, "He moved!. Who'd ever miss a shot that close?" His voice was ragged, with a tremor of emotion in it he fought to control.

Jaronek glanced at him, then shook his head. "He's had a lot to drink, and he's been fooling around with Sarah Rhinegold most of the evening. Then he had a blonde."

Thatcher stood rubbing his thin nose with a long, prehensile finger, staring at Wilkes until Wilkes shifted his feet and glanced away. Only he couldn't ignore the cold, calculating scrutiny. He kept flicking a quick glance toward the doctor. Each time Thatcher's stare caught his glance. Each time he looked away with greater unease.

"Have your horses within a day's ride of town," Thatcher told him finally. "We'll send you word when and where we want them delivered. You'll get your pay when we take over your herd."

Wilkes remained rooted. He couldn't believe that Thatcher was turning him loose. Not after what he had witnessed here in this Copperhead barn. Probably, saner reasoning told him, it was a move to lull his suspicions and render him easier to catch off guard while they forced from him other things they wanted to know. Or the doctor might have some other plan. Maybe Thatcher thought he knew the identity of the other two Union agents here, and was letting him live until it could be dragged from him—probably by torture. Like Hocumb.

The thought put an ugly twisted grin on Wilkes's mouth.

Jaronek took his arm. They crossed to the tunnel, moved along it without words. Then Jaronek swung open a plank door whose outer side was matted with hay wired to the planking. Snow and wind tore at the opening.

"You ain't heard or seen nothing tonight," Jaronek warned. "If you see anybody that was here tonight, don't bat an eye. You don't know them. Any mention of this meeting to anybody and you'll end up down the gulch with your belly knifed open."

Wilkes didn't answer. Shock held him. Yet inside the numbed shell of him, anger pulsed like a raw wound.

"You hear?" Jaronek yelled. "Watch out for Peabody. He knifed the last feller that was going to supply us some horses."

Wilkes twisted to face the hulking Jaronek. "How do you know?"

"I was there, that's how. This hombre even beat Peabody to the draw. He thought he had Peabody talked out of his mad and put his gun away. He started to set back down to eat. Peabody grabbed up a butcher knife that happened to be lying handy and stabbed him to death."

Wilkes was incredulous. "And you were there?"

"In the kitchen," Jaronek admitted. "I just sneaked out the back door and kept my mouth shut. There's too many Union boys in Buckhorn that's friends of Cy Peabody's for me to be tackling that marshal. So I never said nothing."

WILKES started to ask more about it, but Jaronek was through talking. He shoved Wilkes on outside the hay pile and swung the door shut. They walked away wordlessly, hunched against the storm that shoved them along.

Wilkes's mind was a chaos of thoughts. Dr. Thatcher was the leader of the Copperheads here, the man he, Wilkes, had come to get. And Dade Hocumb was dead. Wilkes shivered. The realization that

Thatcher had known Hocumb's mission chilled him. How much more did the little doctor know? Tonight—tomorrow—would his source of information reveal that Wilkes also was a Union Army officer? Burney Wilkes, the stranger who had ridden in, professing to have horses for sale? Wilkes began swearing silently.

"Keep going that way," Jaronek said, stopping, and motioning with an arm. "You'll hit Main Street and you can figure where you are from there."

He was gone in the storm before Wilkes could answer. The wind muffled his last warning but Wilkes got it:

"—careful of Peabody!"

An emptiness within Wilkes grew cold as he stood alone on the dark street. The elation he should have felt, knowing now who composed the Copperhead gang was entirely missing. Uneasiness took its place as he sensed that he himself was the one being baited for a trap. Dr. Thatcher was watching, waiting for him to make some slight move which would betray him.

On the opposite side stood Peabody and his undercover nightriders, foes of the Copperheads and suspicious of Wilkes, and as watchful, as deadly as the Copperheads. Wilkes knew he might reveal to Cyrus Peabody his true identity and purpose in town. But Peabody might pass the secret on to somebody he thought he could trust. It would be whispered to the next man, until eventually Thatcher would hear of it. And once Burney Wilkes was in the little doctor's hands again he could not hope to escape.

Wilkes walked slowly, hunched in thought. After a time he recognized a corner and turned south along Main Street. He was far above the business section. It came upon him suddenly that he had no place to go. He hadn't engaged a room or found a place to stay.

He walked for two blocks with gradually slowing steps. To appear upon the street would be to target himself for others than Thatcher's Copperheads. He had publicly shouted out hatred for the Union cause while bandying words with Jaronek and Whitsdale in the Gold Nugget Saloon. Northern sympathizers would be watching for him, with no idea that he was an officer of the Union Army.

Motion close beside him jarred him into attention. It seemed to be coming from a squat clapboard building along which he had been walking. He peered toward the recessed doorway but couldn't make out who, or what it was. Then eddying wind brought a hint of perfume to his nostrils. Instinctively he touched his hat.

The girl came to him from the shadows and took his arm. Her unexpected move startled him.

"I've been waiting for you," she said quietly. "You can't go back uptown. Peabody is looking for you."

Wilkes did not answer.

"He came into the Gold Nugget," Sarah explained hurriedly. "He had half a dozen men with him. Somebody had told him about you being with Jaronek and Whitsdale, and how you had shouted to them that you wished your horses could trample over all Union soldiers. He—they started looking for you."

Wilkes shook his head. He knew the danger Peabody's executioners posed.

"Why," he asked, "are you troubling to warn me like this?"

"Because—well, I got you into this mess in the first place," she murmured. "When you were at Uncle Billy Horton's I told you that Peabody had burned them out. You didn't know Peabody. And I mentioned later to Jaronek that you had horses to sell. You didn't know Jaronek, or that Peabody and Jaronek are enemies. I handed you ready-made enemies, each of whom were ready to swear you are on the opposite side without warning you what you were getting into."

His arm tightened against her fingers that were gripping him. She was lovely, softly feminine, an alluring composite of all the best in womanhood in the dreams of a lonely man. Just thinking of her eased some the hurt of Hocumb's death.

"It isn't altogether your fault," he said slowly. "Sometimes a man climbs aboard a horse and finds he can't control the animal. From there on he has all he can do

to hang on and ride. Maybe I just climbed on such an animal."

She snorted. "You've got to get off the street," she repeated. "If Peabody sees you—"

HER hand tugged and he allowed himself to be led, walking slowly, hugging the buildings for what shelter they gave.

Somehow the threat of Peabody did not worry him. Because he kept seeing Dade Hocumb's bullet-ridden body sprawled on the barn floor. The clipped precise words of Dr. Thatcher crackled in his ears. They had allowed him to witness a murder—and then had turned him free! Why? He only half-heard Sarah's next whispered words.

"If only there was some way you could get word to Major Davis! He could talk with Peabody and straighten this out."

"Yeah, but—" Wilkes swallowed the icicle that filled his throat.

*Major Davis, she had said! Only how could she have known? How could anyone know, unless—*

The thought that she might be connected with Thatcher's Copperhead gang stunned him. He fought against believing it, against even so much as suspecting. But deep inside him he was remembering—and he knew Jaronek and Whitsdale hadn't been waiting for him on the Buckhorn by accident or coincidence. He recalled the satisfaction in Jaronek's eyes when Jaronek had seen him dancing with Sarah Rhinegold. Only when he'd abruptly left her, when he'd shouted what he had in the saloon, had Jaronek been agitated. Some plan had gone awry.

Her hand was pulling at him, drawing at his attention. "Maybe you could stay at my place," she suggested hesitantly. "Peabody isn't likely to look for you there."

"All right!" His bleak savagery startled her so that she drew back. "I'll hide out at your place tonight! And tomorrow—well, tomorrow will take care of itself."

Hers was a small log cabin on the lower fringe of town. As he approached, Wilkes felt his nerves tighten. He eyed the low shack, wondering what reception Thatcher had planned for him here. But more likely, he thought, Thatcher was just making certain he would know where to find him. A holding pen, a pretty feminine boudoir—scented with blood!

He laughed grimly. Sarah looked up at him questioningly.

"Lead on," he said. "This has been a long day."

Warmth felt grateful on his face as she led him inside. She touched light to a tall lamp with a globe of rose-blown glass. Outside the storm thundered a long rolling overtone.

"I'll change," Sarah Rhinegold said softly. "Make yourself at home. I won't be long."

She was close. Seductive. The scent of her building its own subtle fascination against his nostrils. Wilkes shrugged out of his mackinaw. He reached for her and drew her closer. She came without resistance, lifting warm pulsing lips for his kiss.

When finally he withdrew his own lips, he was shaking and unsteady. And she was laughing. He could see it in her eyes. His enjoyment threw sparks at him and whipped his blood with fire.

Deliberately he called to mind Dade Hocumb's brutal death, deliberately he created hatred and anger to offset the punishing desire the girl was arousing in him. He watched as she stooped to pick up his mackinaw and sombrero from the floor where he had dropped them.

"I'll hang these up," she said; and, when he made no comment, she laughed lightly. At the door to her bedroom she turned to smile at him. "I'll only be a minute." She went in and closed the door.

Wilkes waited, counting a slow three, four, five. The room was warm, the next few hours aglow with invitation. Yet he knew that to remain would be to lose the last flimsy hope for which Dade Hocumb had died. Without glancing toward the bedroom, he was running on tiptoe across the room, fumbling silently at the outer door, easing himself outside.

Chill cut into his very bone marrow.

The rims of his ears tingled.

He ran along the cabin wall. He cut around the edge of the cabin. A dim figure was hunkered there out of the wind. Wilkes saw him too late to stop, too late to retrace his steps. The figure uttered a startled grunt and started to come to his feet. Wilkes slammed himself against the man bodily.

They went down in a sprawl. An elbow jarred Wilkes's head back. He fumbled, trying to reach the man's throat to prevent an outcry. But the fellow jerked away. He lifted his voice, yelled:

"Hey! This way! He's outside!"

## CHAPTER VII

### *Killing Is the Answer*

FROM somewhere close in the darkness a voice answered. Wilkes began backing away from the cabin. He saw a dim, vague figure and stopped. But whoever it was moved away without noticing him. Then, when the darkness and blinding snow had completely obliterated the man, Wilkes began running. A shot blared from behind him. More men began shouting.

He headed directly into the wind, half-stumbling, fighting his way through low drifts. He veered to cross the street, and there found a dark slot that opened between two buildings into which he pressed himself.

The wind brought a faint wisp of voice to him.

"Here's his tracks! Fetch a lantern somebody! We'll see where he's heading!"

Farther back between the two buildings, where the wind could not cut it away, the snow was drifted thigh deep. Wilkes swore as he floundered through it. Here was track they couldn't miss. Yet he dared not go back.

Behind the buildings an ice-glazed alley opened. He crossed into the full vehement slash of wind. Cupping his palms over his ears, he let the wind drift him. The cold ate into his feet. He could feel his fingers stiffen and become numb. Still he went on swearing, moving blindly in his effort to elude Thatcher's watchmen.

Far down the slope he recrossed the road. His chattering teeth would not still. He stamped, trying to work circulation and life back into his feet. He had managed to reach open country, but open country would mean freezing. He had to get back to town. He had to find shelter or die—or was it find shelter *and* die?

A light ahead of him seemed almost within reach before he became fully aware of it. He stared, wondering, and slowly came to realize that he had made a circle and that the light was coming from Sarah Rhinegold's cabin.

He could smell the acrid smoke of burning cedar. A picture of the glowing stove within the cabin flashed across his mind. He came up against the back wall and leaned against the logs while he fought for breath. Here there was no light. He began fumbling along the wall. The window was latched. Moving on, he came to a door. Tracks already blown half-full of snow led away from it.

For a time Wilkes stood hesitant, then slowly reached for the door latch. His numbed fingers gripped his pistol. He shoved—and the door swung open.

From the front part of the cabin came a mutter of voices. But there was no outcry from the warm blackness opening beyond the door. Wilkes rubbed his fingers, trying to make them pliant again. He stepped inside and eased the door shut. A fine slit of light marked edges to a door on the opposite side of the room.

Then the shrill tones of Dr. Thatcher speaking vehemently, stiffened him.

"You fell in love with him! You lost your head over a damned sneaking Union spy!"

Wilkes stared at the door which leaked its slits of light. He could picture Thatcher—peering gimlet eyes, tight thin ridge of lips.

"You warned him and told him to leave!" Thatcher's voice rose higher. "Don't lie! No man in his right mind

would start out afoot in this storm unless— Twist her arm again, Jaronek!"

A half-muted feminine shriek of pain sliced through the cabin.

"Now, maybe?" Thatcher's query was merciless. "You told him that you were supposed to keep him here all night! You told him—"

Wilkes knelt at the door. There was no key-hole. He swore silently and brushed his fingers along the edge of the door, working it ajar. He put his eye to the slightly widened crack.

Sarah was in a chair, her shapely arms twisted behind her and held there by Jaronek. Wilkes could see Thatcher standing in front of the girl, peering down at her like a vulture being held away from carrion it wanted.

She was wearing a soft cloth gown that had come open to her waist. Neither Jaronek nor Dr. Thatcher seemed aware of the exposure of white flesh. While Wilkes watched, Jaronek applied pressure to those twisted arms. Sarah fought and trembled until, despite her will, a scream broke past her lips.

"He's on his way to join Major Davis, like as not," Thatcher said hoarsely. "We've got to get out of here." He turned. "Whitsdale, get Thomas and Burke and ride over to Ketchell's Springs. Davis is camped there with his Union troops. Tell Major Davis that Hocumb is dead. Say that before Hocumb died he sent you with word that Davis is to take his troops and go—oh, any place, just so it's far enough north of Buckhorn to give us a chance to get our horses moving."

WHITSDALE moved across Wilkes's field of vision.

"What if Wilkes beats us there?" Whitsdale's glance was fixed upon Sarah's soft white breasts. Wilkes could see his lips working in and out against his teeth.

Thatcher snorted. "Afoot? In this storm? He won't be."

Whitsdale reluctantly turned toward the door. Thatcher's voice stopped him. "Tell Clyde Burrow to send out word that all horses that we are holding are to rendezvous at Chilhole Pass. We'll have to shove them south just as soon as we can."

The door slammed and Whitsdale was gone. Jaronek stepped away from Sarah Rhinegold. Her arms fell limply, numbed by the constricting torture he had applied. Thatcher took two quick hopping steps away, wheeled, and came back to stand before her.

"A year's work ruined!" he cried. "A whole year's work gone because you had to fall in love with a damned Union spy! You knew he was a Union spy, didn't you? You knew I received word direct from Denver City! I had one chance to kill him, and didn't because I had use for him, but—"

Thatcher's bony face was bloodless. He went on, "Now we've got to rush things. That means we'll probably blunder somewhere. Oh, damn you!" His slim hand flashed out to slap the girl across the face.

"I—I've tried to tell you, I didn't," she said. "Yes, maybe I could love him, if these were ordinary times so that anyone dared feel a decent emotion. But he never knew how I felt. I—"

Thatcher's outraged cry stopped her. "Choke her, damn it! Or use your knife

## THE TUCSON BED

WHEN overland stage service from San Antonio to San Diego began in 1857, one of the overnight stops was in Tucson. Because accommodations here were so inadequate, travelers soon began to talk about the "Tucson Bed," which the stage passenger made up by lying on his stomach and covering himself with his back.

—*Gene Olson*

on her, Jaronek! A damned Union spy and she could love him if she dared feel an honest emotion! Next she'll be loving Cyrus Peabody! Or Lincoln himself!"

Jaronek's broad hulk moved around, blocking off Wilkes's view. Wilkes fumbled at the door, jerked it wide.

Jaronek whirled. At sight of Wilkes he pawed for his gun. He took a step back, then leaped behind Sarah, in the chair.

Intent upon Jaronek, Wilkes didn't look at Dr. Thatcher until the edge of his eye caught a glint of lamplight reflecting from keen steel. He flinched aside, swiveling his gun toward the doctor. And in that moment Jaronek's gun lifted toward him.

The scalpel Thatcher had thrown sliced a cold paralyzing pain across Wilkes's chest. He stared at the gun in Jaronek's fist and tried desperately to get his own weapon into line. Recoil bucked against his numbing fingers. He saw Jaronek's mouth jar open, saw the fatal widening of eyes gone sightless.

Again Wilkes triggered, and a third time. He whirled to snap his last two shots into Thatcher. The little doctor reeled back under impact of the two heavy slugs and went down.

"You should get it, too!" Wilkes shouted at Sarah. "I ought to—to—"

The scalpel was burning in his side, scraping ribs each time he moved. Every breath sickened him a little more. Soon how he'd stiffen, grow sick, maybe even go down. But Thatcher was dead. And Jaronek was dead. That much, at least, he had managed.

The room began swimming before his eyes. He backed up until he could brace his shoulders against a wall. Sarah was out of the chair. She came toward him.

"It was all your little game," Wilkes spat accusingly. "Smile and invite me here, and all the time—"

Her face was close to his now, her hands reaching out. He knew that he should beat her down with the empty pistol clutched in his fist.

Her hands were strangely gentle, her eyes without triumph or exultation.

"Don't ask me anything about Thatcher or the horses," she said. "I won't tell. Not even under torture. I had my part and I did it, and now it is over. With Thatcher dead, the whole movement in this part of the territory will collapse."

She jerked the scalpel free before Wilkes was aware that her hand was close to it. He felt a hot gush of blood across his side. But there was no strength in him to resist.

SHE dropped the scalpel to the floor. "Dr. Thatcher had his satchel with him," she said. "He always carried it. It gave him a legitimate appearance, he said. I'll bandage that side for you."

She did not wait for him to answer. As she worked about him with gauze and iodoform, Wilkes watched with growing wonderment. When she reloaded his pistol and gravely handed it back to him, he smiled.

"I am with the Union Army," he said.

"I was with the South. Now—" A sound at the door silenced her.

Across her shoulder, Wilkes saw the door flung wide, saw the bulging eyes and bloodless lips of Cyrus Peabody. In Peabody's hand was a cocked gun. Behind him was the townsman.

"So!" Peabody's voice was gloating. "So you fight among yourselves now!" He came farther into the room. His gun lifted.

Revulsion ran through Wilkes and poured its own virile strength into his blood stream. "I am Captain Burney Wilkes, United States Army!" he snapped. "This young lady—"

Peabody's mouth widened mockingly.

Remembering what Thatcher had said about a detachment of Union troops at Ketchell's Springs, Wilkes turned to the townsman who accompanied Peabody.

"Major Davis has a Union force at Ketchell's Springs. He'll verify my identity." Wilkes turned to glare at the lawman. "And he'll probably verify the fact that another Union officer was here in Buckhorn—until he was stabbed by the town marshal who didn't have sense enough to find out who was a Copperhead and who wasn't before he started killing!"

Peabody blinked. His skin grew mottled and seemed to wrinkle about his eyes.

"Get word to him if you don't believe me!" Wilkes snapped to the townsman. "But hurry."

The townsman turned to go. "This man you speak about," he said. "This Union officer. He was stabbed, you say?"

"He was a damned Copperhead like these two are, too!" Peabody spat. "He got what was coming to him!"

"An Army Board of Enquiry will determine that," Wilkes said coldly.

The townsman cut in quickly, "I'll get word to the Union forces." He still stood staring from Wilkes to Peabody, then turned and began hurrying toward the door. "A Union officer—"

Peabody's shot came swiftly, without warning. The slug caught the townsman low in the back and hammered him against the wall where he clung for a single agonized moment. Then he went down.

"Nobody knows," Peabody panted. "Nobody'll ever know." He cocked the gun and swiveled toward Wilkes. "They'll think you Copperheads—"

Wilkes let him get that far. Then the gun Sarah Rhinegold had reloaded for him as a gesture of faith bucked in his fist. Peabody rocked, startled by this fate that had overtaken him. He looked down at his bulging belly, grasped it convulsively.

"The Army'd have hanged me," he whispered. "I had to—"

The last appeal of the fanatic was lost to Wilkes. He scarcely heard it. And when Peabody sagged down, he turned toward the girl, staring into her eyes.

"I buried your uncle Horton under rocks out there," he said. "I'll get to Major Davis myself, and he will see that he gets honorable burial as a loyal citizen who wanted only to live and let live. Not kill, and kill, until—" Wilkes glanced briefly at Peabody—"killing is the only answer to every problem."

He reached for her, wanting to say more. And, somehow, he knew that she was as eager to listen. • • •

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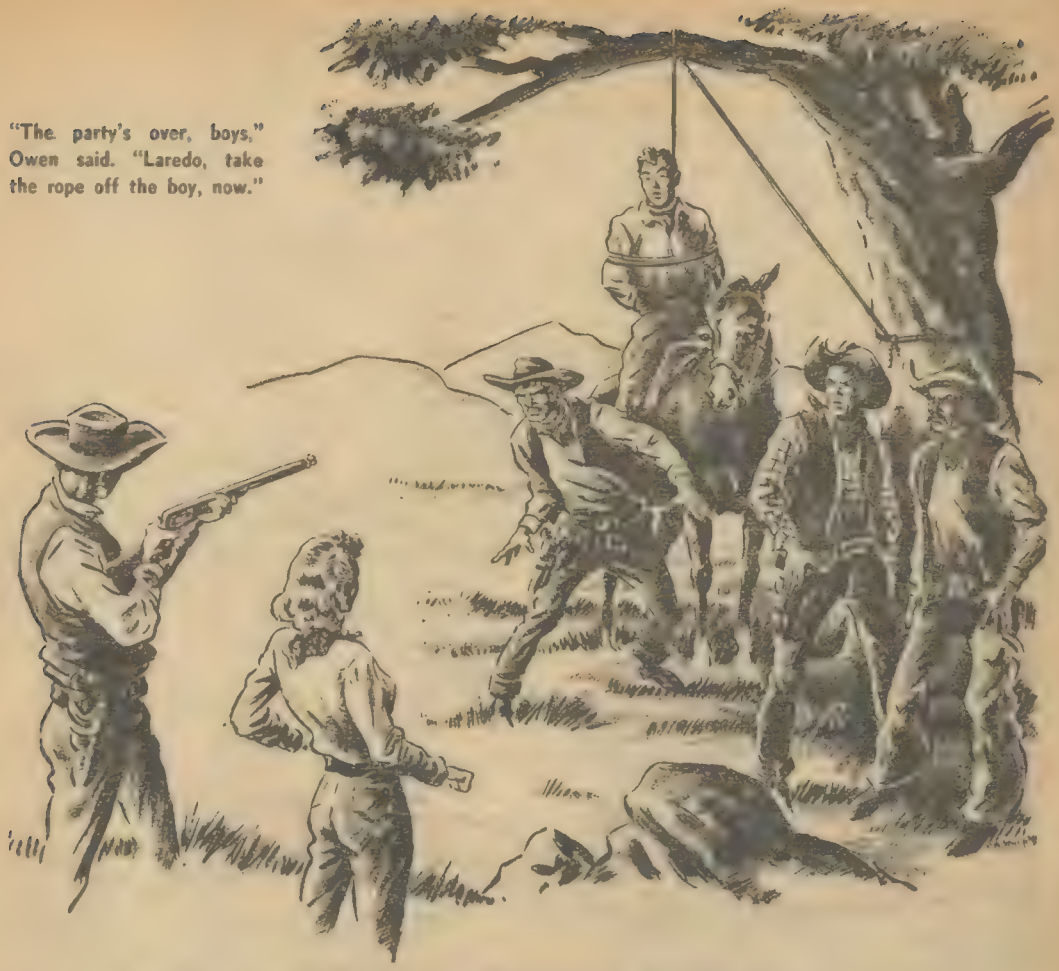


"The party's over, boys," Owen said. "Laredo, take the rope off the boy, now."

*It wasn't Owen's war. But where was the man who could resist Mary Kileen's call to arms?*

# .45's Rod This Range!

## By PHILIP MORGAN

OWEN BARNES came from the house shortly before dawn and stood on the porch of the small ranch home, which was placed hard against the dark bulk of the Shortgrass Hills. These wooded hills rose behind the house and their glades furnished most of his range. East of the house, the land fell away swiftly to the flats, a barren, waterless region where no cattle could be ranged.

Owen rolled a cigarette and drew on it irritably, made restless by the past month's hard riding. Now roundup was over and his cattle were shipped and there was nothing that had to be done. Unable to sleep, he stood there and watched dawn come redly into the east-

ern sky and then he turned with sudden decision and went into the house.

By the time Bill Kilpatrick, Owen's only hand, was around, Owen had a small pack of food and blankets on his horse and a Winchester in the saddle boot. He rose to the saddle as Bill came from the house, yawning and stretching. Owen grinned at the small puncher. "I'm going down to the Wells and try for an antelope. Be back in three days."

"I was gettin' sick of lookin' at you anyhow," Kilpatrick said, returning the grin. "I'll take care of things."

Owen swung from the yard, made suddenly carefree by the prospects of the trip. He was a man who hated the constant drudgery of ranch life and he had to break away every so often and run the vinegar out of his system. By the time he was back from this hunt, he would be ready to settle down to the winter's hard work.

As he came off the slope onto the flats, he looked across at the Apache Hills, rising sharply in the east. Seeing them, he thought of Page Howley, whose Three X brand took in all the land from the west rim of the flats to the Apaches. Howley was ambitious, greedily so, and the only thing that kept him from moving in on Owen was the barrenness of the flats. The lack of water there was something even Page couldn't lick. Owen wasn't sorry. He didn't like Howley, but he wanted no fight with the man.

HOWLEY HAD a big crew, headed by Laredo Mercer, a tough, little gunman. It was no outfit to choose a fight with. Owen pushed the thoughts from his mind and settled into the leather, enjoying the free swing of the pony under him. The air smelled clean and it had a sharp bite to it, bringing blood to his cheeks and sending an energy all through him.

When Owen came from the flats onto the first of Three X grass, he was amazed to see a small cabin directly ahead and some land freshly plowed around it. This was a nester, of course, but he couldn't quite believe it. Howley would never permit homesteading on his range. Out of curiosity, Owen swung toward the cabin, wanting to talk to the man who had the cold nerve to buck the rancher. He rounded into the yard and a girl ran from the cabin to meet him.

He saw that she was pretty, the prettiest girl he had seen for a long time. Her hair was as yellow as sunlight on the prairie. Her eyes were a deep blue and her figure was full and rounded. In the same instant, he saw the desperation in her face, saw that she had been crying. He swung down from his horse and went to meet her.

"What is it, ma'am?"

"I'm Mary Kileen," she said breathlessly. "Mr. Howley and his riders just came and took my brother Mark away. They said he stole one of their Three X cows. They said they were taking him to the sheriff."

"It's nothing to worry about," Owen assured her. "Ben Jorgenson is fair. He'll see your brother gets treated square."

"That isn't what I'm worried about," she said bitterly. "They don't intend to take him to town; they intend to hang him. Howley's been trying to run us off here ever since we came late this summer. We wouldn't scare and now he's using this way to get rid of us. They'll kill Mark, I know they will. You've got to help me."

Immediate caution moved Owen. The girl seemed nice enough, but he had no way of knowing whether or not she was telling the story straight. Swinging a man just to get him off some land was pretty raw even for Three X. "I don't see what I can do, ma'am. I don't think Page Howley'd go that far. He's just tryin' to throw a scare into the kid."

"You don't know," she cried. "It isn't just him. There was a little rider along, a man they called Laredo. He was like a crazy man, the things he said to Mark. You've got to stop him; he means to kill Mark." The mention of Laredo Mercer caused an instant change in Owen's thinking. Howley was one thing, but Laredo

was another.

The little foreman of Three X was a gunman and a killer, with a wide sadistic streak. He might intend to hang the nester and it was well known that he had plenty of influence over Page Howley. Owen didn't want to stick his neck out, but the sight of the distressed girl was too much. Besides, he had never liked Laredo Mercer's insolent attitude. He finally shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"All right, I'll go have a look. Which way did they go?"

"I'll show you," the girl said. "I'll have to ride behind you because that Laredo hand took the only other horse on the place. If he wasn't going to do something wrong, why did he take the horse?"

The girl's words made sense and Owen began to feel an urgency, a fear that she might be right. He reached down and caught her arm and swung her up behind him on the horse. She told him which way they had gone and he put the horse into a canter.

They rode in silence, the girl worried about her brother and Owen wondering why he was in this. It wasn't his fight. In honesty, however, he had to admit that he knew the reason. It was the girl; she was his sole reason for bucking Howley and his tough crew. At the moment, he wished desperately that he had the tough, little Bill Kilpatrick along. It would have narrowed the odds a bit. He wasn't sure yet what he intended to do if he found Howley about to hang Mark Kileen. But one thing was certain, Howley wouldn't take kindly to anyone sticking his nose into Three X business.

THEY CAME on the bunch in the first large stand of timber that rose at the foot of the Apache Hills. They had Mark Kileen tied, sitting his horse beneath a tree. There was a rope around his neck and Laredo Mercer was tying the loose end to the trunk of the tree. There was another rider, whom Owen didn't know, and then there was Page Howley, sitting to one side, his face a harsh mask.

None of these still-posted men heard Owen and the girl drift up. They were all absorbed in their grisly job. Owen halted the horse a hundred yards from the scene and came from the saddle. He drew the Winchester and moved forward fast and silently, the girl staying close behind him. He caught a glimpse of Mark Kileen's face then and all his doubts were gone.

The kid was sitting straight up in the saddle and while there was fear in his eyes, he was taking it well. Admiration for him rose in Owen and anger came.

He was twenty yards away now and he pulled the hammer of the Winchester to full cock just as Laredo Mercer finished tying the rope to the tree and stepped away. The click of the cocking hammer was loud in the stillness. It pulled the Three X men around and it dropped Laredo's hand to the butt of his gun. He saw Owen looking at him over the barrel of the rifle and let his hand fall away.

"The party's over, boys," Owen said evenly. "Laredo, you'll take the rope off the boy, right now."

"Stay out of this, Barnes," Howley warned, recovering from his surprise. "This man stole one of my steers and he gets hung."

"Page, I'm in no mood for foolin'," Owen replied and his voice was deadly. "You're a skunk and everyone in the country knows it, but I didn't think you'd sunk low enough to hang an innocent man just to get him off your land. You used to at least give 'em a fightin' chance. Whose idea was this, Laredo's?"

The words struck home and Howley flushed. "I do my own thinkin'. You're runnin' into more trouble than you can handle, Owen. We always got along. Get on your horse and ride out of here and forget what you saw."

"Laredo, you've got five seconds to get that rope off the kid's neck. After that, I open up."

Laredo Mercer was a gunman with a bad reputation. Since Howley had hired him, Three X had become tougher and tougher to get along with. Laredo was

a cold-blooded killer, with a terrible pride. He watched Owen carefully now, gauging what he read in the big man's face. He didn't like what he saw. Owen had the Winchester centered full on his chest and fear stirred in Laredo. He uttered a curse and moved to the tree. With a slow movement, he drew a knife from his pocket, flipped open the blade and cut the rope. Then he moved to the kid's horse and freed his hands. Kileen quickly lifted the rope from his neck, unable to suppress a shudder.

"Get their guns, Mark," Owen said, and the tall, skinny kid did as he was told. He buckled on one of the gunbelts and climbed back into the saddle and rode over to where Owen and Mary stood. Mary was crying softly.

Owen turned to Howley once more. "Like I said, Page, you're a skunk. I ought to kill the whole bunch of you. You stole a horse from the girl and you ought to swing for that. I'll let it go this time, but leave them alone from now on. When you figure you need some law, call the sheriff."

Laredo Mercer stepped forward then. "I want to tell you somethin', bucko. You and the kid'll be dead before the week's out. You have my word, understand. Nobody bucks Laredo Mercer and lives."

Owen dropped the barrel of the Winchester and fired. A bullet dug the ground between Laredo's legs and the little gunman jumped instinctively. Hate blazed from his yellow eyes and he was so mad he was crazy.

"Get something straight, Laredo. I'm no kid and I'm no farmer. You pull a gun on me, you'll have someone to beat. You been scarin' and killin' a bunch of clay pigeons so long you got the idea you're tough. Don't ever make the mistake of pullin' on me. You better tell him, Page. You know."

"I know you're tough, Barnes," Page Howley said, "but you ain't that tough. You walked all over Three X today and we don't take that from any man. I regret it some, but Laredo's right. You're dead."

"Let's go," Owen said. "Get one of their horses for Mary, and bring up my black, Mark." The kid brought the horses and Owen slid the Winchester into the saddle boot and rose to the leather. The Three X men watched in silent fury as they rode away.

ONCE CLEAR, Owen reined in. The girl immediately came to him and leaned from her saddle to brush his cheek with her lips. "I can't thank you enough, Owen," she said, her eyes and her voice warm.

"If you ever need any help any time, any place, just holler and I'll come runnin'," Mark said as he wrung Owen's hand. "Another five minutes and I'd've been swingin' at the end of that rope. That man Mercer's crazy. Howley wanted to take me to town, but Mercer said to swing me and Howley finally gave in."

"Did you steal the cow?" Owen asked.

"No, I bought it from old Tom Painter last week and I had it hangin' in the lean-to behind the barn. Howley found a butchered Three X steer and came bustin' in on me. He found the carcass in the lean-to and said it was his cow. I didn't have a bill of sale and Painter is down to Laramie seein' a doc about his lumbago, so I couldn't prove I bought it from him. By the time he got back, it would've been too late."

"They just wanted to get us off the land," Mary broke in. "That was their way of doing it. Howley probably intended to get Tom Painter to say he never sold us a cow and then get Mark convicted and sent to jail. But this man Mercer wanted him killed. Why?"

"The man's a killer. You can see it in his eyes. Somethin' gets twisted in those fellows' heads and they aren't like other men. They say this Laredo has killed twenty men in gunfights over the country. But we're wastin' time. He meant what he said about huntin' you down. You get back home and take what stuff you can carry on a horse and ride out of here and don't ever come back. If you do, you'll have to face him, and you wouldn't have a chance."

"What about you?"

"I haven't got anything they want and after he cools down, Page'll see it. He'll keep Laredo off my neck. But he'll tell him to go ahead with you, because he wants you off that land."

"We ain't runnin'," the kid said stubbornly. "We homesteaded that ground all legal and proper and we're stayin'. What kind of a country is this if a man can run you off your own land?"

"Don't be a sucker," Owen said sharply. "What good's that land going to do you if you're dead. You aren't a gunfighter; you can't go up against a man like Laredo."

"Just the same, I'm not going. A man starts runnin' and he never stops. I might as well find out right now if I'm big enough to hold what I have. If I'm not, I might as well be dead."

Anger surged through Owen at the kid's stubbornness. "Stay there and be killed then. If I'd known you were going to act like a fool, I'd never have bothered gettin' that rope off your neck." He swung his horse about, ready to ride away when the girl's voice lashed out at him.

"What kind of man are you, Owen Barnes. You're going to ride away and let them kill Mark when you could save him. Don't you have any decency. Why don't you help him?"

"Never mind, sis," Mark said. "He's done more than enough already. You can't expect him to fight my battles for me. Thanks for everything, Owen."

"He might as well never have done anything," Mary said hotly. "He rescued you once, but now he's going to let you be killed. If he was any kind of a man, he wouldn't be thinking only of his precious skin. He'd know that he had to help you because you need him."

"Ma'am," Owen said wearily, "I've told you the only way I know of savin' your brother's life. If he's going to be stubborn and die rather than take the advice, it's not my worry. I'm sorry you feel the way you do, but I don't intend to get killed. I probably wouldn't have much more of a chance against Laredo than Mark would. So long."

He sank the spurs into his horse and rode off, leaving them sitting there, forlornly. Riding hard, Owen looked straight ahead, knowing it wasn't his fight, knowing he could leave them with a clear conscience. He didn't look back, didn't let himself think of that boy going up against Laredo Mercer. It wasn't his fight.

It worked for half a mile. At the end of that distance, Owen reined in and looked back. The girl and her brother sat where he had left them, looking after him. He knew what they were feeling, the fear, the terrible aloneness. They were watching their last hope ride away from them. With a curse, Owen reined about and went back to them. He pulled in and sat loosely in the saddle before them, a wry grin on his broad-featured face.

"You," he said softly, "are gazin' at sucker number two. Let's go." The smiles that broke across their faces were payment enough for his decision. But it was time to act now and he cut off their hurried words of thanks. "We've got to get back to your place right now. They'll be comin' soon and we have to get set." So they rode for the homestead at a gallop, not talking, trying not to think of what they knew was coming.

WHEN THEY reached the homestead, Owen sent both of them into the cabin with a few hurried instructions. After they were inside, he rode to the small, log barn and put his horse inside. He turned the other two mounts into the corral and returned to the barn and squatted down inside, out of sight, to wait.

Rolling up a smoke, he tried to figure what had made him do what he was doing. The girl had somehow made it seem shameful for him to ride off and leave them. Yet, if the truth was faced, he should have done it. He had been right when he said it wasn't his fight. But then, he had to admit that she had been right when she had told him he wouldn't leave if he had any decency.

At least, when he went up against Laredo Mercer he would have a chance. That was more than Mark would have had.

Thinking of the girl then, of her fair-haired beauty, her wonderful, young body, he knew that she was a big part of his decision. She was a thoroughly desirable woman and he found that he wanted her to think well of him. Perhaps, when this was over, there would be something for them.

Now that his thoughts had started moving, he could not stop them. He thought of Page Howley, of the man's greed, and realized that it was way past time for Howley to be pulled back into line. Hiring a killer like Laredo made Howley little better than one himself. When a man had sunk low enough to frame an innocent man into a hanging, it was time he was stopped.

The drum of hoofbeats interrupted Owen's thoughts.

Peering out cautiously, Owen saw two horsemen coming across the sloping ground at a hard run. Even at this distance, he recognized the huge girth of Page Howley and the wire thinness of Laredo Mercer. He wondered about the third man and decided Howley hadn't wanted him along.

The two riders drew rein some four hundred yards out and sized up the situation. They saw two horses in the corral and must have decided that Owen had gone on home. They came on again until they were in the yard, before the cabin.

"Come on out of there, Kileen," Page Howley called. "We'll have a little talk with you." The door came open at once and Mark Kileen stepped out into the hot sunlight. He was hatless and coatless and he wore a single gun, the holster tied down to his leg. He looked slight and very young, completely unafraid. Again Owen felt admiration for the boy.

"I'm right here," Mark said, and at those words, Owen walked quietly from the barn, toward the group.

"You crossed us, kid," Laredo Mercer

outwears ordinary twills
...keeps that brand-new look
Lee Chetopa Twill
IN LEE SHIRTS AND PANTS
Buy them separately or in matched sets
THE H. D. LEE COMPANY, Kansas City, Mo., Minneapolis, Minn., Trenton, N. J., San Francisco, Calif., South Bend, Ind., Dallas, Tex., Boaz, Ala.

said. "I told you I'd kill you for that. Reach for your gun."

"You take Howley, Mark," Owen said then, his words striking through the still air. Laredo Mercer came around and Owen saw a look of ferocious anger cross his face. He came from the saddle in one smooth movement and stood facing Owen over the twenty yards of dusty yard.

"Howley's yours, Mark. He's old and he'll be slow. Take your time and aim for his belly." With that, Owen forgot about Mark and about Page Howley. He centered his entire attention on the small gunman before him, tensed and still in the strong light.

Laredo's thin lips were curved in a wicked smile and there was confidence in every line of his taut body. This was an old tale for the little killer. This was what he lived for, these few terrible moments of flame and smoke and sudden death. Hate and a frenzied lust to kill had burned the soul from him, so that he was nothing more than a shell of a man.

"You saved me a trip, Barnes, by bein' here. You're a bigger sucker'n I figured you for." The words spilled from him and he was still saying them when he went for his gun. Owen saw Laredo's arm flash down and up and he did not try to match the draw. He felt his own gun coming up and he raised it for a careful aim as Laredo fired the first time. The gunman's bullet whipped by Owen's head and Owen saw the sudden frantic fear come into his eyes as he realized he had missed.

Laredo was still trying to get off his second shot when Owen dropped the hammer of his .45. The big slug caught Laredo high in his skinny chest and drove him around in a tight half-circle. He held there a moment, trying to will his muscles to work, and then he was dead and falling with the looseness of death. He lay there in the dust, looking small and harmless.

REMEMBERING Mark then, Owen glanced up quickly and found Page Howley with his hands squarely placed on the pommel of his saddle and his face white with fear. Mark Kileen stood before him and there was a look of complete surprise on the boy's face. He had seen the man he had known as a tower of strength and ruthlessness back down before him, and the sight was not quite believable. Owen walked to Mark's side, put his gun on Page Howley and deliberately cocked it.

"You wouldn't kill a man in cold blood," Howley cried.

"It's entirely up to Mark," Owen replied coolly. "You were going to kill him and now he'll decide what happens to you. If he says to, I'll shoot you from the saddle."

There followed a moment's tense silence. Mary Kileen came from the cabin and stood beside her brother, but she did not speak.

"Let him go," Mark said finally, his voice heavy with weariness. "There's been enough killing. If he'll give me his word that he'll leave me alone, he can go."

"I swear it," Howley said quickly. Owen let down the hammer of his gun and slid it back into its holster, relief going all through him.

"Get out, Page, and take Laredo with you. Don't ever come back." Howley got quickly down and put the dead Laredo over the saddle of the other horse and mounted again. Leading the dead man's horse, with its grisly burden, he rode from the yard. Owen turned to face the Kileens.

"It's over and you won't be bothered again."

"Thanks to you," Mary said. "We'll never be able to repay you."

"It's all right." Owen said. He said that to both of them, but then he looked at Mary. "I'll be ridin' this way; will that be all right?"

"I was hoping you would ask," she said. "I'll like it, Owen." She was smiling at him and the smile was a promise of many things. He carried the smile with him all the way home. ● ● ●

*His last words were: "I go with Custer and will be at the death."*

# "I Go With Custer..."

## By Wayne A. Curtis

AS THERE were no witnesses to the Battle of Little Big Horn, June 25, 1876, with the exception of one Indian scout—and this has always been a disputed fact—accounts of the action were taken from the position of the bodies and from the papers found on Mark Kellogg's body. Kellogg was a correspondent for the Bismarck *Tribune*, in the Dakota Territory, who was greatly respected by the Crow and Sioux tribes. These papers were found intact after the battle.

Lieutenant Bradley, who first surveyed the area, reported to General Terry that Custer and some 190 men of the Seventh Cavalry lay dead in an area not far from the Little Big Horn River. Actually, there were 261. Upon hearing this news, General Terry immediately marched to the Little Big Horn area.

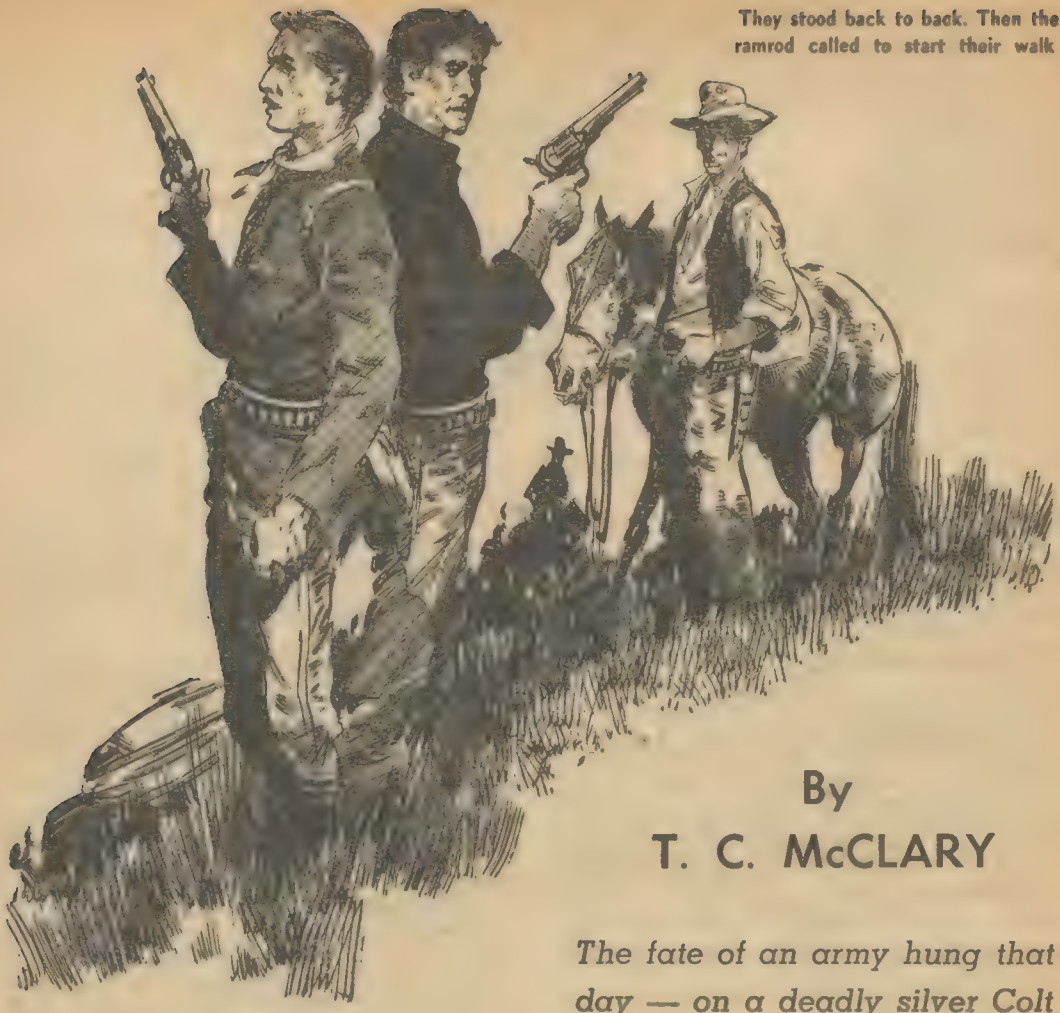
The bodies of soldiers were strewn over an area of several hundred yards, the main body being confined to a line on the side of a small rolling hill. Custer was apparently retreating in order continuously to the apex of the hill, where, strategically, he would have had an advantage over his previous position. Had this point been reached, the battle would have been prolonged and the inevitable end delayed a few more hours.

It was not a fact that General Custer was the last to fall. From the positions of the bodies it was only assumed that he was one of the last to go down. Beside Custer lay his brothers, Colonels Tom and Boston Custer, his brother-in-law, Colonel Calhoun, and his nephew, Arthur Reed. All of the bodies were stripped of their clothing and mutilated, except Custer's and Mark Kellogg's. After the battle the squaws had swept over the bodies with clubs and rocks, crushing the heads of some and decapitating others. Of the men who were wounded, many types of torture were inflicted upon them. The most popular was the severing of the genital organs and the shooting of arrows into their groins.

The five companies were attacked from all sides, obviously being surrounded by some four thousand warriors. Custer, behind his men with his relatives and officers, had been shot through the head and body. All were found in their battle positions lying where they had died.

Ten dead squaws were found in a ravine near the field of action. These killings were attributed to Custer's Crow scouts. Yet it seems doubtful that the scouts would kill their own women. It was in all probability the work of a group of Custer's men. Soldiers of that era did not suppress any urges to kill Indian women. Rape of Indian women was not uncommon. Custer himself was called the "Squaw Killer" by civilians and soldiers alike. The Sioux had another name for him —"Yellow Skunk," which was about the worst name anyone could be called in the Indian territory.

There was no need for the massacre of Little Big Horn. It was due to the stubbornness of Custer, who wanted to show up his contemporaries, and thus led his men to destruction. He was advised before the battle by General Terry to take more men with him. Mark Kellogg, war correspondent for the Bismarck *Tribune*, who heads the list of famous reporters, knew from the beginning of the outcome. His last words were: "We leave the Rosebud tomorrow and by the time this report reaches you we will have met and fought the red devils, with what result remains to be seen. I go with Custer and will be at the death." ● ● ●



They stood back to back. Then the ramrod called to start their walk

# The Silver Colt

By T. C. McCLARY

*The fate of an army hung that day — on a deadly silver Colt*

CAPTAIN MARINER, aide to Colonel Chivington, stood by at rigid attention, his body stiff as a fighting mastiff's. His muscular jaws were clamped, his lean, cavalryman's face smoldered under his dark south Texas burn. Either way you looked at the matter, far off Washington was sending things to hell and back, and the Cavalry would hold the bag.

*The Man From Washington* was there, and the area general was brick red under his mutton chop beard. He had not even given Colonel Chivington time for rest after riding at relay speed, one hundred and seventy-four miles through the blasting summer heat and dust of Texas.

The general slapped the table with the flat of his hard-callused hand. "Do it any damn way you want!" he barked at Chivington with profanity. "Or do it any gol damn way you can. But break this Vardeman Duke, or break his influence, or find reason to shoot him in the head!"

Chivington ran an index finger under his high collar. He said grittily, "Down our way, sir, we're still *damnyankees* to the Texans. And this Duke's done nothing but express his constitutional opinion . . ."

"Constitutions be damned!" roared the general who had fought a bloody four years to defend one. "Texas needs its arrogance broken. It has got to ratify the fifteenth amendment to be restored to the Union. The President has sent a personal message to see that the amendment is ratified so Texas can be restored to statehood at the next session of Congress!"

"Vardeman Duke is only one Texan," Chivington noted.

"He is one damn Texan too many!" the general barked. "What he says is what one fourth of Texas does. Texas is still under martial law and you have the full authority of the Adjutant General's Office, and you are Provost Marshall of your own district. That is a lot of authority to resign from, Chivington."

"Resign, sir?" Chivington half murmured, and paled beneath his tan. "I see, sir. I will do what I can."

THE GENERAL lurched forward and pointed one thick finger at him like a pistol and his eyes looked like silver bullets spinning toward the colonel's head. "You will get Vardeman Duke to change his mind or cut him out of the picture altogether!" he bit out like trigger snaps.

Chivington said, "Very well, sir," and stood up. His aide, Captain Martin Mariner, had stood throughout the conference.

The general let a full lung of breath rumble out like surf fluttering a spindrift from his mustache. He nodded at Mariner. "Captain, you may see to a drink for us on that. Tell the orderly to make it a large drink."

Mariner clicked his heels, turned smartly and left the room. His was not the mincing precision of a martinet, but the solid pride of a cavalryman who demanded respect of his men, and gave it to his superiors.

He was a young man, not yet thirty, but he had already been a brevet colonel himself and had fought clean through from Bull Run to the last bloody stand at Five Forks, and he looked it. It had been at Five Forks that he first crossed blades with Vardeman Duke.

Their sabers had broken as a famous general went down right beside them, and knowing what that general carried in his belt, both officers had leapt afoot to grab the famous pair of Colts. Savagely, they'd fought with bare hands atop the general's body, and each had straightened like a spring knife levelling one of the guns at the other, but their triggers had clicked on dead cartridges.

The battle had roared between them, but after the war, they had crossed trails again at Natchez. The girl was seventeen then. That would make her twenty-two this year. Their heavy cavalry gloves had cracked each other's cheeks at the same instant, but a bloody riot between discharged Union and Confederate soldiers had broken loose and split them up, and the proper occasion for presentation of that challenge had never arisen. And the Army had passed its strict and dishonoring regulation against dueling by the time Mariner was ordered down to Texas.

The girl had waited. Lord knew why. But she had waited for one or the other to change his mind, or else for them to settle their differences. They were tough fighting men, but they were gentlemen before that, and so neither would take advantage of pressing his suit until the other had relinquished claims.

Vardeman Duke had paid his respects to her last year to see if she had a mind of her own in the matter, but she could not make a choice. This year, this week, in fact, Martin Mariner would be granted a long overdue leave, and make the long trek to Natchez on the same errand.

He was thinking about that as they rode

back to their post over the rolling, russet Texas *llano*. He said to Chivington, "I suppose, sir, I had best withdraw my request for leave?"

Chivington was still alternately crimson and grey of both face and mood. "I haven't decided what is to be done yet," he said. "It is too late to put pressure on Vardeman Duke under the Confiscation Act."

The colonel swore to himself: "Damn me, I have dined and drunk and slept at Duke's hacienda! I can't accuse him of rustling or smuggling or traffic with the Comanches!"

"As much to the point," Mariner considered, "there'd be a local insurrection and all-out fight that might sweep clean across Texas if you did. The general must know this is a powder keg. The Texans were never honestly licked."

"Maybe headquarters would like that!" Chivington said savagely. "The Army won the war, but the politicians are in the saddle now. This is one more carpetbagging trick. Frankly, I don't blame the Texans for their resentment. This is one hell of a way to treat good fighting men!"

A JACKRABBIT sprang into the air beside them and bounced off across the simmering landscape, and more because of his mood than anything else, Mariner snapped out his pistol and dropped the rabbit at fifty yards.

"Good shooting," the colonel approved. "I would give a good deal for a Colt like that. That was one of a pair made special as a presentation, wasn't it? I recall the story at the time. Colt told the general that no other sidearm would match those for twenty years."

Mariner looked at the beautiful, silver-chased Colt that filled his hand. Maybe the new Frontier model was a technical improvement, but it was still a trade item. It didn't have the quality, the workmanship, the balance. Colt must have looked into the whole future of small arms when he made this pair. Twice already, Mariner had sent the silver Colt back for adaptation to improve ammunition, and it had not changed its balance or accuracy in the slightest.

"Yes," he agreed. "They were a fine pair. They never should have been separated."

Mariner put the gun back and thought bleakly about Vardeman Duke. He had the deepest respect for his courage and his ethics . . . and he hated his guts. Maybe his feelings were a thing that only fighting men could understand. Under different circumstances, they might have been friends. But as things stood, one of them should have stayed in the bloody mud of Five Forks, or in that neat little cemetery beside the dueling ground at Natchez.

They bent their trail and traveled down across a slanting, deep-grassed country, and saw the milky blue river twisting through the shimmering lemon-colored haze. After a two hours' march, the fort formed out of the sea of beating heat and danced upon the blazing waves.

The colonel sucked a lungful of breath through set teeth. "Martin," he said, "I know what that leave means to you. Whatever I do, it is going to mean trouble. You can't treat men of Vardeman Duke's calibre like rabble. I will see the trouble out and then resign my commission, which will mean a colonelcy for you, but that may stand to your advantage since it will lift the regimental officers up one grade."

"You, *resign?*" Mariner asked with shock. The Cavalry was Chivington's life. He couldn't picture him any other place. "What will you do, sir?"

The colonel breathed a flinty laugh. "It will not be politics, I assure you! But I don't see that this leave would stand against your record. It is up to you to take leave or stay."

Mariner turned it over in his mind. "One thing, sir," he murmured, "when do you plan to take action against Duke?"

"As a gentleman, I will have to give him time to consider the alternatives," the colonel said. "I will stack my bet and give him one week to call or throw in."

"He'll never throw in," Martin said.

Chivington nodded grimly. "I know it!"

"That's Saturday you'll start moving," the aide considered. "My leave, if I take it, starts Monday retreat."

"You can give your answer at the last minute," Chivington suggested.

"I can give it now, "Martin told him. "I will take my leave, sir."

Chivington flicked him with a glance of faintest surprise, then smiled and put out his hand. "I will leave my recommendation on your record, Mariner," he said. "You have been a good aide. You will always be a good officer."

"Thank you, sir," Martin told him. His throat felt a little full.

CHIVINGTON rode out with an orderly for *Rancho Duc* at sundown. There always was a certain danger in night rides for Union officers in this bitter land of Texas, and Chivington could have sent his message by courier. His personal call upon Vardeman Duke indicated his respect for the man in several ways. And indirectly, his personal opinion of the duty placed upon his shoulders.

He was back safely by ten o'clock that night and had a general order posted, putting the nearby town out of bounds, which was tantamount to a declaration of hostility, if not quite war.

Martin Mariner stood Monday retreat, and was given a send-off supper by the colonel in the officers' mess. Chivington took occasion to draw him aside from the festivities; he knew some smatterings of the Mariner-Duke story.

"I want you to know I can understand why you would feel bound by honor not to be part of an official war on Duke," he said. "I was a little taken aback at first, at your decision to take your leave, but with the time to think it over, I offer you my respect and hand, Mariner."

"Thank you, sir. That lifts a considerable load off my shoulders."

They shook hands. They had their private drink. They looked at each other with the hard, realistic smiles of comrades-in-arms, and officers, and gentlemen. Circumstance had placed both men in a position that threatened their code of ethics and pride.

Tuesday sunup, Martin Mariner rode out of the fort in mufti. For six weeks now he would be a civilian. He was permitted precisely the same latitude of action as if he had temporarily resigned from the Cavalry.

He rode into the nearby *presidio*, bringing what there was of the town tumbling out to stare. Word, of course, had reached the town that it was out of bounds. Officers seldom stopped here.

He racked in front of Gonzales' Pueblo, a tough enough joint for soldiers in a bunch. For a man alone, without the protection of his uniform, it could, and had been, a form of virtual suicide.

Sheriff Tatum had watched him ride in and trailed him the half block down the street. He strolled abreast just as Mariner ducked under the hitch-rail. He said inscrutably, "Mornin', Cap'n. Kind of an unusual visit for you, ain't it?"

"Quite," Mariner agreed. "But I have always wanted to see the inside of the Pueblo in the light of day."

Tatum turned to look at the place dubiously. "Don't let much daylight in there," he allowed. "Seems like the boys will keep right on drinking if they don't know it's morning." He extracted a cigar from his hat band and concentrated undue attention upon the way he rolled it. "Boys from Duke's home ranch been in there since Saturday and don't know Saturday's over yet." he added.

"Then I'll see the place in full swing," Mariner smiled agreeably.

Tatum struck a match with his thumb nail and waved it toward the other's clothing. "You ain't quit the Army?"

"Let us say that for six weeks I am a private citizen," Mariner told him.

"You're still wearing your Army ring," the sheriff noted. Then he said, "Private citizen's kind of a hazardous thing to be sometimes."

Mariner shrugged his solid shoulders. "Well, I am a bit thirsty, Sheriff."

"Feel that way myself," Tatum drawled. "With your permission, I'll drink with you."

THEY moved together through the thick 'dobe door into the stinking, stagnant smells of the saloon. The room was filled with sound as they came in. It went silent as a desert on a dead dark night. In the back of the room a girl giggled and there was the sound of a slap, and Gonzales hissing, "Quiet, female dog, and get up-stairs!" Then Gonzales stepped behind the bar to serve them.

On both sides, Duke riders lined the bar . . . ugly, silent, fuming with their hatred of damnyankees, and keyed by their weekend drinking. They stood there smoking, not touching their liquor, just watching Mariner with their hatred smoldering.

Gonzales leaned on the bar and said, "An unusual honor, *Capitan!* I theenk the last time you so honor my humble Pueblo you came in uniform. Yes?"

Mariner nodded. "To collect a deserter who was hiding here."

"Ah, yes," Gonzales smiled. "The poor man. Too late he sees the light and then for want of a horse he gets . . ." He drew a finger across his throat.

"Some men never see the light in time," Mariner told him. "But what I came in to find out was if you know which ranch Vardeman Duke is presently at."

He caught the suspended breath among the Duke riders. One of them hitched his belt and asked on a flat, hostile note, "What would you want to know for, Cap'n?"

"Possibly," Mariner said, "so that I could call on him."

The man's lips slashed out in a mocking grin. "Looks like the whole damnyankee Army wants to call on him!" he said. As quick as it had appeared, the smile washed off his face. He spit. "Well, Duke will be ready for 'em, you can bet!"

He stood undecidedly a moment glaring at the officer, then jerked his head at his riders and said, "We'll ride now. This place is starting to stink."

They spur-dragged out, each one glaring at Mariner. The sheriff took off his hat and mopped his forehead. He said, "I'll stand this drink, Cap'n!"

They drank and the sheriff escorted him back outside. He looked puzzled and uncomfortable. He said, "I don't think you're quite right on that civilian stuff, Cap'n. Mebbe for drinking and such, but I figure if you got into the wrong kind of trouble, the Army might claim you."

"It is more likely to disclaim me!" Mariner chuckled.

"Bad stuff, Army. Bad stuff, civilians," the sheriff grumbled. "Ought to be a law making everybody a cowboy or a rustler. You know where you stand with them."

Mariner bowed. "Maybe I will turn cowboy then, Sheriff."

"Now if you're really looking for Vard Duke," the sheriff muttered grudgingly as the officer swung into leather, "he's at his *Rancho del Norte*. But that's a powerful hot ride out there, Cap'n. So hot, sometimes strangers don't get there."

"I've got my canteen," Mariner said, but what he slapped was his silver pistol.

He backed out and swung his thoroughbred and put it into a mile-eating canter for the far ranch. Over the rolling *llano*, and down along the dry flats, and across a desert that fired a man like an egg upon a griddle, and then up into grass.

Fresh dust smell was in his nose every mile of the trail. Once he glanced back at a hilltop and saw a mirror or a tin pan glint. It was a long, hot ride out there as the sheriff had said. But it was more than heat that put the strain between a man's shoulder blades and caused him to ride with his teeth set edge to edge.

With day's first change of light, he reached the gorge and put his horse up into its chill, shadowed silence. His hoofbeats struck sharp and echoed back in there, and it was a place where a man cut a clean target for a mile, with a five-hundred-foot abyss beneath him.

It was cool in the gorge but he reached the top with sweat upon his brow. He stopped to permit his horse to blow and looked back. He saw that riders were trailing.

THE HACIENDA sat out upon this flat, grassed table, unadorned, except

for some cottonwoods that grew around its spring. Far out beyond, the slanting even light showed cattle grazing. It was a peaceful scene, the kind of a scene an artist would pick to paint. The kind of a place that would suit a girl like the one at Natchez. And why should a man risk this happy life and a girl like that when he didn't have to . . . when the politics of an invader had turned his personal enemy into open game?

The trail twisted down through brush into a boulder-littered coulee, and around a turn, a rider sat, barring his way. Two hard-eyed riders sat on each side of the trail, carbines resting on their saddle-horns. The hollow strike of shod hoofs on rock reached up behind him like a wall.

He drew rein and sat there with both hands resting on his saddle-bow. Nobody moved, nobody spoke, but defeat's cruel and vengeful hatred moved over him like the ground swell of a dangerous sea. The whocka-ta-whock of fast running hoofs reached through the silence, and the cowboy of the cantina came up on a piebald horse that was covered with foam.

He gave Mariner a smoldering look. "Just sit there, Yankee, and get a little tan," he ordered.

Maybe two hours went by without another word spoken, but not once did any of those men take their eyes from him. The light filled with sundown's vibrant pastel hues, and day's heat began to lift, and the drift of the faintest breeze played upon his neck.

Then Vardeman Duke came from the far end, at a walk, square jaws set hard, eyes like wet coal, piercing Mariner all the way. The riders moved aside to let him pass, rough men but respectful; this was still feudal country.

Duke stopped and ordered the cantina rider, "Give me his gun and move away."

The man trotted over and snatched out the silver Colt. Interest in the weapon put a keenness in his face as he handed it to Duke. He signaled his boys who moved back a space.

Vardeman Duke walked his pony three paces forward. All of the burning hatred of that day at Five Forks was in his face, and in his eyes the same look as that night at Natchez. But something new was there now . . . suspicion.

He said on a flatted note, "What did you come here for, Mariner? For fair treatment, you came too late."

Mariner said, "This is the first day of my leave, and I am on my way to Natchez."

Duke snorted. "You will have to carry your gravestone with you! Are you running out on the Army fight, or is this some more carpetbag trickery?"

Mariner's lips pulled back in a tight smile. "I came to answer a slap I once was given! I came to take the word to Natchez that there is no longer a choice to hold her up, or to let you take it."

Duke's eyes sprang wide and then hooded. He thought a long time while weighing the gun he held and then looked down at it and laughed gruffly. "I heard you were a top snap shot as far away as Natchez . . . that nobody would stand a chance with you unless they could drop you before you spent all your bullets."

He suddenly lifted his face from the gun and it was black as tornado clouds with hate. "And now the Army's been practicing you for near a year just for this job, for that's the time they've been trying

## *Sagebrush Sam Says:*

**Cussin' cowhands may be all right, but a heap of 'em turn out to be all swear and no sweat.**

to force my hand!"

Violence rose through Vardeman Duke and beat against the mask of control he habitually put upon his feelings and his face. "Killers I can handle, and I can handle my own feuds. What I don't like about it is a man using a gentleman's reason to cover a snake trick!"

MERCILESS things were whorling in Duke's eyes and cruel contempt beat out of him in waves. Honest, man-to-man fighting was one thing with a Texan. A trick, a planned advantage, was something else. Duke had his lasting hatred of the Union, and at his beck and call, he had most of Texas. And he'd figured the Army was using this ruse, training a gentleman killer who figured to shame him into personal combat, as a means of avoiding an action that might set Texas flaming.

"Mariner," he grated, "this is a big country to look through for a man who's missing, and there ain't a spot in fifteen miles where the best telescope could see down into this coulee. What made the Army think they could get away with this?"

"Chivington doesn't know about it," Mariner said tightly. "He thinks I took my leave to get out of fighting you with a full troop to protect me."

Duke's eyes glinted wickedly. "But you've been practicing up on sixgun shooting from a saddle!" he mocked him. "My boys have seen you!"

"I figured this would be a fight of one shot each, afoot, at forty paces," Mariner told him.

"You're lying!" Duke barked, but certainty had left his voice, and he stared, glowering, with his breath going deep and fast. "You're lying!" he repeated, but his voice faded back into his chest. He shook his head. "But by gawdamighty, I have got to give you a break or I could never face her!"

His head jutted forward and he glared at Mariner as if he did not know that he'd just spoken. "A straight duel, one shot set, level ground, no advantage, guns out and no snap draw?"

Mariner nodded.

"All right, I'm glad to have the chance at last!" Duke said. "But I am going to tell you something, sonny . . ." He broke off and cast a look of arrogant pride out at his men. "You are taking on a losing match! You drop me dead and no power that exists could keep those boys from tearing you to bits!"

"I took that chance when I rode in here," Mariner acknowledged.

Duke studied him a moment, then straightened to his full height. He blasted at the cantina cowboy, "Pull your boys aside and keep their hands in line! Me and this Yankee Army man are going to have a little spat!"

He swung from his saddle and whacked his pony off. He stood there knocking the bullets out of Mariner's gun. He handed him the gun and two bullets and said, "Fix your own set!" and took out his own gun.

He snapped out four shells and showed Mariner the loaded chamber. "Satisfied?"

Mariner nodded. One shell for test, one for use. They stood there with their guns hanging straight down and put one shot each into the ground.

Duke pulled in his ramrod. He gave him instructions on counting off the "Fire!" He gave the man a hard driving glance. "No hothead tricks from the boys now! I will personally hang the man on hooks and let him skin himself if I find two shots in this damnyankee when I'm finished!"

The ramrod nodded, but said to Mariner, "You better pray Duke's shot catches you true!"

Mariner's mouth set with irony. He grunted, "That should about even any difference in our shooting!"

"You come looking for it," Duke growled. "You could have had things differently until last Saturday!"

THEY STOOD back to back. The ramrod called to start their walk, and counted out the paces. He called out the signals leading up to "Fire!," and all hell's

vengeance was in his voice.

Their guns swept up as they pivoted. Etiquette called for a straight arm, which meant no hip shot. They looked straight along their sights into the hatred of each other's eyes, and fired. They stood there then, listening to the double bark of their shots drifting off into the sundown.

Mariner wavered a little with the unsteadiness of relieved tension. He wasn't hit. He'd heard the bullet whistle by his ear. He watched Duke and Duke watched him. Then Mariner wigwagged with his gun and called, "No hit!"

Vardeman Duke gave him a long, thoughtful look, and grudging respect was in his face. But he was a fighting man and could have respect and still hold hatred. "So we'll have to do it again some time to match the guns, and there'll be no message for Natchez this time!" he spat.

He booted his own gun and knocked his hat up and wiped his brow. He was wavering a little too, maybe unsteadied by the force of his own conflicting feelings, and maybe in reaction from suspense. Battle was one thing. Cold, man-to-man shooting on a count was something else.

Duke signaled his ramrod to bring his horse. He swung up into the saddle. He ordered the ramrod, "See this man off the place, and see him off alive!"

Then he looked at Mariner. "You'll never get to Natchez any more than you'll get this pistol!" he promised. "You better stay with your Army and help it get licked."

He swung his pony then and gave a bark of command and led out into the sundown for the hacienda. The ramrod sat in his saddle while Mariner swung aboard. He said, "Yankee, you won't ever know what a lucky dog you are!"

That was the word spoken clean back to town. The ramrod simply dropped off his trail as they came abreast of Gonzales. Mariner stopped at the fork at the end of town, and looked at the thread of trail that rambled off into morning's vibrant golden heat, and Natchez, and then he touched his pony and rode out to the fort.

Chivington asked, "Still on leave?"

Martin Mariner said, "With the colonel's permission, I will cancel."

Chivington nodded briefly and clapped him on the shoulder. Enough of the grapevine had reported so that he could piece out most of the story. "That was a dangerous thing to do," he commented.

Mariner shook his head negatively, "No, we had to have it out sometime anyway, and maybe we still do. But it would have saved a good deal of bloodshed, even if both bullets had gone true."

By next evening, the grapevine had really built the story. The officers' mess was giving him a special blow-off, but he ducked it. For himself, he didn't mind missing the shot so much. But there was the trouble that loomed ahead this week, and the even greater trouble that would flame out of it. For that reason, he felt that he had failed, and he would turn in his resignation along with Chivington's, if they survived.

BUT THERE was one thing the grapevine didn't get until two days after the sullen-eyed little *mestizo* girl delivered the package. The package held the other silver Colt, and the pencil-scrawled note, "Say a good word for me at Natchez."

So he had hit Vardeman Duke after all! And either from pride, or to give Mariner his chance back to safety, or both, Duke had soaked up the shot in silence, and holed up to fight it out alone.

Chivington came in shortly after. He had a paper in his hand and he tossed it on the table.

He said, "Captain, it seems we will not have any trouble after all. So I am putting you in command of the platoon going north on relief. You are relieved of your command upon arrival at headquarters, and you will sign the date on that paper, which is your new leave . . . extended three months for matrimonial purposes."

He picked up Vardeman Duke's silver Colt and examined it with interest. "Yes-sir, a fine pair of guns."

He gave a smile that was shorn of its usual stiffness and put out his hand. "Good riding, Captain. Your command is already standing at guidon." ● ● ●

# DRIFTING MAN

*A Novelet*

*by*

GILES A. LUTZ

## CHAPTER I

*The Prodigal Returns*

JESSIE CRANDALL rode down the dusty street, his eyes curious-bright. The town had not changed a great deal, and it had piled a heap of years upon itself. Twenty-five to be exact. Some of the buildings he remembered were gone, and new ones had taken their places. The business center of the town may have been a little longer, with a few more houses around it. But that was all.

It was the same weather-beaten, border town, the same dusty streets with the sun beating down upon it. He could close his eyes, and it was just like he had left it, just as if those twenty-five years were only a yesterday.

He shook his head, a slow, solemn gesture. A man could not wipe out twenty-five years that easily. But still it was a long time to carry a memory. Docia. The

**Both Jessie and the kid had that problem: Too much**

Dane bent over, pulling the struggling Mushro with him

name rang in his mind just as it had a million other times. Some things a man never got over.

He looked his fifty years, except for his eyes. They were blue-bright, with an interest the years could not dull. His face was aged and weather creased, the skin brown and leathery. The generous mouth was solemn now, but it could widen into an engaging grin. That grin had held a girl's interest once, and Jessie had taken it away. Docia. There was that name in his mind again.

He stopped before a saloon and grunted as he climbed stiffly out of the saddle. He knotted the reins and beat the dust from his Levis. This country had always been a powerfully dusty one. He stepped across the wooden walk into the shade of an awning, limping a little as he went. He

**pride — and too damned much willingness to fight**

had never quite gotten over that bronc dumping him some ten years back. He grinned at the recollection. A man forgot he could not do the things he used to do. When he tried them, someone was always around to hand him a package of grief.

HE STOOD in the shade, watching the passers-by, hoping to see a familiar face. He absently jingled the few dollars in his pockets. Money never worried him. When those dollars were gone, there were more to be made, if a man were willing. It had worried him at one time, it had caused him to drift aimlessly for all those years. He wondered why he had returned to this town and could not say. Nostalgia had a strong pull on a man, usually with a disappointment at the end of that pull. A man expected things to be the way they were. He never quite learned to accept change.

He shook his head briskly. No one he knew was going to pass, and he was getting in too solemn a mood. A couple of drinks before supper, a good meal, and a night's rest, and he would drift on in the morning. He had seen the old town, and maybe the unrest would be soothed a little—or stirred up more. He could not say.

He stepped inside the shadowy interior of the saloon, and his eyes widened with pleased surprise at the sight of the man behind the bar. There was change in Tate Fletcher, he was fat and bald, but still, Jessie recognized him. They had played and fought together as kids. They had ridden together on their first jobs.

"Tate," Jessie roared and bounded forward.

Tate squinted at him, then a delighted grin broke across his face. "Jessie," he yelled and hurried around the end of the bar.

They pummeled and mauled each other, saying all the obscene things about one another that came to mind. Tate backed away under the punishment and panted, "You haven't changed any, Jessie. You're still a roughneck."

Jessie grinned. "You know there never was a day I couldn't take you. You've changed."

Tate's answering grin was rueful. "I traded the back of a horse for something easier. I've spread out a little. That's all."

He waddled around the bar and reached beneath it. "This bottle is special. I drink it myself."

Jessie poured himself a glassful and sniffed at it. Its aroma was rich and pleasing. "Maybe I oughta have it tested then, Tate. Here's to you."

It was good whisky, it had warmth without fire, it had authority without hitting a man with a club.

Tate asked, "What are you doing, Jessie?" He looked at Jessie's clothes. The expression in his eyes said he did not think Jessie had done too well.

"Drifting," Jessie said vaguely. "A man sees a lot of country. Is Jim Reinhart around?"

"He's dead, Jessie."

It came as a little shock, it always did. Barnsdall had moved away, and Tate did not know what had happened to Hervey. Jessie finished his drink in thoughtful silence. All those old, familiar names gone. The loneliness grew more acute inside him.

TATE said quietly, "You haven't asked about Docia."

Only an old friend would have dared bring up that name. Jessie made his face relax. "Is she still around?" The heartiness in his voice had a false note.

"Still running from her, Jessie?"

Heat was in Jessie's face. But this was Tate talking, this was an old friend. His voice was even. "I call it drifting, Tate."

"You knew she got married?"

Jessie nodded. Did he know it? The date was seared in his mind with a red-hot iron.

"She married Rash Downey. He's dead, Jessie. Been dead some five years."

Jessie knew the muscles in his cheeks twisted. He said, low-voiced, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Why did you run away, Jessie?"

The slumbering violence leaped into

full fire inside Jessie. It had been there for twenty-five years, never quite out.

His tone was raw and harsh. "Because her father had too much money. Because she wanted to buy me, like she would a colt that took her eye. She wouldn't live in the little place I had. Her father was going to build us a big new house, he was going to hand me a herd of cattle." The violence burned out, and he was just tired. "I wouldn't have been my own man, Tate."

"Ah," Tate said. "You'll see her?"

Jessie shook his head. A man could stir the ashes of memory some and get a sor-

DOCIA

rowful satisfaction from them. If he stirred too hard, they rose and choked him. "Reckon not. I'll be moving on in the morning."

"Docia has had trouble," Tate said. "Downey was a poor manager. After her father died, things slid downhill. She's got some land left. Not much more. She'd like to see you, Jessie."

Maybe. Maybe not. They had said some harsh words, they had parted with anger between them. No, that was a sleeping dog best left lying.

Tate read the decision in Jessie's face and sighed. The doors swung open, he looked toward them, and his face brightened. "Here comes Dane Downey, Jessie. Docia's son."

Jessie did not want to look. He took a long time with his turning around. He saw a fresh-faced kid of some eighteen or nineteen years old. He had Docia's eyes and hair. A good chin, too, but that was worry shadow in his eyes.

Jessie felt a sharp pull at his heart. This could have been his boy, this could have been— He let the violence rise again, wiping out the hurting thoughts.

"Dane," Tate called. "Come over here. This is an old friend of your mother's."

## CHAPTER II

### *Some Early Trouble*

JESSIE'S face had the proper interest. He hoped his eyes were veiled. He murmured, "Howdy, Dane." and liked the flash of the kid's grin.

Tate handed him the special bottle and said, "Go sit down. You two might have some things to talk about."

Jessie picked up two glasses and walked to the table, mentally cursing Tate. They could talk about a lot of things, and each one would hurt more than a knife slice.

Jessie lifted a questioning eyebrow before he poured a glass for Dane.

Dane grinned. "Go ahead. Mom would kill me if she knew. She treats me like I'm still a kid." It was rebellion but more passive than active. His tone said how much he thought of his mom.

Jessie thought, he's man-sized. He's old enough to have a drink if he wants it. He kept his voice casual. "How is Docia?"

The worry shadows in Dane's eyes deepened. "She's in something," he burst out. "She won't tell me what it is. She acts like I'm too young to understand."

Jessie nodded. It happened that way often. A woman lost her husband, and she poured all her love onto her offspring. "Want to talk about it?" he murmured.

He thought for a moment, then the words flooded forth. "Mom's been seeing

these two for the past four months. They're always talking in low voices. When I come around, everyone shuts up. Her eyes shine like she's got a big secret, but she won't tell me anything."

Her eyes shine. A big secret. The words ran through Jessie's mind with sharp, cloven hoofs. Maybe she was planning on getting married again.

He took a careful breath. "Who are these two, Dane?"

"One's Fabian Gourley. He's a big, fat man with a greasy face. The other calls himself Celso Mushro. He's little with lizard eyes." Dane put hopeful eyes on Jessie.

Jessie could breath more freely. From the description, neither sounded like Docia's type. But still Dane could be prejudiced. He said, "Never heard of them."

Disappointment washed across Dane's face. Jessie reached over and gripped his arm. "I'll be around for awhile." The words just sort of popped out. He had not intended saying them. He was surprised to find he was glad they were said. "I'll see what I can dig up. I'll keep in touch with you."

Dane flashed his grin, and the worry in his eyes had lessened. Just talking to someone helped.

Jessie watched him walk through the doors. Good kid, good eyes. Worried about his mom. Docia— Things all ran together and blurred in his mind.

HE GOT up and moved to the bar. "Tate, you know a Gourley or a Mushro?"

"By sight only. Seen them around some with Docia. Good clothes, Jessie. And good horses. They travel high."

Jessie digested this. "Old Chris Sumner still have the bank?"

Tate nodded.

Jessie grinned. "Chris must be a hundred and fifty. Think I'll talk to him."

He called from the door, "Get another bottle, Tate. I'll be back." Tate's whoop of delight rang in his ears.

Sumner scowled at him from under white bushy eyebrows. He was not any hundred and fifty, but he must have been close to ninety. Outwardly, a hard, crusty, old codger. That was armor to protect a big heart.

"You know me, Chris?"

Sumner started to grunt, "No," then bellowed, "Jessie Crandall. I never forget a face. Sit down, boy. Sit down."

Jessie sat down beside the desk. Sumned had not changed. To him, Jessie was still a raw youngster. It was good to find some things like that.

He came straight to the point. "Chris, know a Gourley or a Mushro?"

"Seen them," Sumner grunted. His fierce old eyes studied Jessie.

"They good for Docia?"

Sumner sucked in a great breath. He was like Dane—for a moment ethics and long custom dammed his words, then they burst forth. "Jessie, I don't think so. I don't know what she's doing, but she doesn't talk to me anymore. You know Docia. She's hard-headed."

Yes, Jessie knew her. He patiently waited.

"She had seven thousand dollars in her account. It's all gone now."

Jessie's eyes widened. Seven thousand was no fortune, but a person with that much was a long way from being broke, too.

"She's sold off most of her cattle, Jessie. Got a bad market for them. She wouldn't wait. What's she doing with the money?"

It was quite a question. Jessie did not know—yet. He put his long legs under him and murmured, "Thought I'd be around for awhile, Chris."

"Good," Sumner rumbled. " 'Bout time someone took a hold of things." He peered up under those bushy eyebrows. "You should have done it years ago."

Jessie nodded curtly. Don't dig into that old grave, Chris. It had been opened once today. How many times could a man stand it?

He stood outside the bank, his eyes troubled. Docia was spending a lot of money. None of her friends knew for what. Was she giving it to those two?

And if so, what was the string? Jessie sighed. A lot of unanswered questions like that troubled a man's mind.

He started to go back to Tate's place, when he saw Dane driving a buckboard down the street. He hailed him, and the youngster pulled up with a flourish. Jessie coughed in the ensuing cloud of dust The grin was only in his eyes. Kids liked flourishes like that.

Dane said, "I'm going home now, Jessie. Why don't you come with me?" His face had an eagerness and a trust.

Jessie murmured, "Why not?" and climbed into the buckboard. If he were going to stay around, this meeting had to come sometime. It was funny how hollow his stomach was, and his throat felt as though someone had knotted a rope about it.

## CHAPTER III

### *The First Meeting*

SHE WAS standing on the porch when Dane drove up. She was forty-five. Jessie knew to the day how old she was. She had always been on the small side but sweetly made. She had not lost any of that. Perhaps her hair was not quite as bright and shining, and Jessie saw a few wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. But it was the same Docia.

His face felt stiff, and he was afraid the trembling inside him would show. He climbed down and drawled, "Hello, Docia."

Her eyes went saucer round, and her lips trembled. He thought her eyes misted over. He was not sure; he was not seeing any too clearly himself.

"Jessie," she cried and ran down the steps.

He took her extended hands as she said, "It's so good to see you again."

He trusted himself to speak. "It's good to see you, Docia." He dared look at her. She meant that. Her eyes were shining. His grin was a little stretched, but there "It's been a long time, Docia."

"A long time," she echoed.

Did that echo have a wistfulness in it? Don't go building up anything, he warned himself. You threw all that away when you left. It hasn't changed any.

He said, "Dane picked me up in town." He looked around for him. Dane had melted out of sight. Some kids picked up wisdom in a hurry.

Docia took his arm and said, "You'll stay for supper, Jessie. I won't have it any other way."

His grin was more natural. She had always been an ordering woman. That had not changed, either.

He took a quick look around before he walked into the house. It needed repairs and paint. The outbuildings showed neglect, too. Docia had not spent any of that money on her place.

Dane was in the kitchen, slamming pans around on the stove. "Thought I'd get things started," he grinned. "I kinda figured you'd stay for supper."

Docia moved to Dane's side, smiling proudly up at him. The kid was better than six feet tall. He had more than twelve inches on his mother.

Jessie drawled, "He'll be quite a man when he grows up." He felt that tug at his heart again as he looked at the pair. A drifting man saw a lot of country, but he did not really live. He missed most of life.

He stood in the corner of the kitchen, watching her move about with that brisk efficiency he remembered so well. He put a hand on the solemn thoughts and pushed them down when they threatened to engulf him. A man picked his road, then wailed about it the rest of his life. He would not let it happen tonight.

THEY were sitting down to the table when Jessie heard the rumble of wheels from out front. Docia jumped up and said, "I'll see who it is."

She came back, her eyes glowing with an eager excitement. Her breathing was much faster. "It's Mr. Gourley and Mr.

Mushro. They want to talk to me."

Jessie could not keep his heart from sinking. One of those two was exciting her, one of them was making her look ten years younger.

Dane growled, "Tell them to come back, Mom."

Her eyes snapped at him, and a stubborn set took hold of his chin. He got that from Docia, too. "Mom, what is it? All this mystery—"

She said, "Dane," with that commanding note, and Dane's words faded. I'll tell you in good time. Did you ever stop to think I might be thinking of you in this?"

She turned her head and said, "Jessie, wait. I'll be back as soon as I can." She swept out of the room.

Dane's face was sullen, and Jessie said, "Take it easy, son." It was odd how naturally that title slipped out. He said hastily, "Can I get a look at them?"

He went to the front door and stayed in the shadows of the hall. A big, fat man was just handing Docia into a carriage. A carriage, no less. He was elegantly dressed, and his oily face was split in a broad smile. Jessie felt his skin prickle. A toothy smile always rubbed him the wrong way. The other was a little, dried-up man. Dane was right. Even from here, Jessie could pick out the lizard eyes.

The carriage drove off, and Dane burst out, "Do those two look right to you?"

"If they were around, I'd sleep with my reins in one hand and my pistol in the other," Jessie murmured.

"What's Mom doing with them?" Dane cried.

Jessie shook his head. There was the obvious answer for that shining in Docia's eyes. But not one of those two. Docia did not have to be that desperate.

He said, "Maybe we'll find out, Dane. Tell Docia I couldn't wait."

He borrowed a horse and rode back to town. He doubted he would get any answers from Docia. They would have to come from Gourley or Mushro. And that could be hard, too.

He asked Tate where Gourley and Mushro stayed when they were in town, and Tate said, "The Frontier Hotel." His eyes were sharply bright. "You got something, Jessie?"

Jessie shook his head. He had nothing. He walked into the hotel and asked the clerk for Gourley.

The clerk said, "He isn't in now."

"I'll leave him a message. What's his room?"

The clerk answered, "Two-fifteen."

Halfway through the message Jessie tore it up. "I'll be back later and see him." If he remembered the Frontier right, room 215 was in the rear. And there should be a sloping roof right under its window.

HE SAID his thanks and moved out of the hotel. He lounged on a street corner until after dark. The lights gave the town a warm, friendly appearance. No matter where a man went, he always felt a pull on his heart strings for the country in which he was born.

He moved down the alley in the rear of the hotel, cursing softly as his foot struck a tin can and sent it clattering before him. He was right about that sloping roof. He could almost reach up and touch its edge. He jumped and caught it and pulled himself up, grunting with the effort. He crept up its slope and stretched out just under the window. He lay there, a darker shadow among dark shadows. He prayed no one would come along, see him, then shoot him off this roof like a stray tomcat.

He heard the door of the room open and he stiffened. The window was up. He hoped it would be left that way. The blind rattled down over his head, and he tried to make himself part of the roof. He dared to breathe as he heard footsteps moving away from the window. Whoever had pulled down the blind left a slight crack of maybe an inch.

A deep, rumbling voice from the room said, "Celso, finish your drawing. And make it right this time. We had trouble last time making your drawing match up with the location."

Mushro grumbled a protest in a high, whining voice. The voices fitted each of

them. Here were the lion and the jackal.

Jessie's eyes were puzzled. He could not understand this at all. He risked a quick look through the tiny gap between the blind and sill. The big man was pacing back and forth. Celso was seated at a table, his back toward the window.

Jessie ducked back down and heard no more talk for awhile, only the pacing of those heavy steps. The high voice said, "This won't last much longer, Fabian."

Jessie's skin tightened at the rich, oily chuckle. "Oh, I think we've got another time or two. You complaining, Celso? Tomorrow will be another good score."

The pacing resumed, and under the cover of its sound, Jessie slipped to the edge of the roof and dropped to the ground. The beat of his heart had quite a tempo. Docia had no personal interest in either of those two. It was something else. He went down the walk toward Tate's, and his step was light.

*Sagebrush Sam Says:*

**Never trust an hombre that spits agin the wind.**

He borrowed a pair of field glasses from Tate, and leading the borrowed horse, rode back to Docia's. He did not go too near the house. He picked a hill from where he could clearly see it. The warm, yellow light in its window was like a beckoning finger. He stared at it a long time before he picketed the two horses, unrolled his bedroll, and crawled into it. The stars were a familiar roof. He stared upward at them, but he did not see them. He kept seeing Docia's shining eyes.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Buried Treasure*

HE AWAKENED with the first light of dawn. He was stiff and hungry. He worked the stiffness out, but the hunger would have to wait. He could risk no fire because the smoke might be seen from the house. The big man had said "tomorrow," which was today. Jessie could wait like an Indian.

The hours dragged away, and he accepted their slow passage. A drifting man knew how to spend time. It was almost noon when he saw the carriage pull up in front of the house. He put the glasses on it, though he did not need to. It was Gourley and Mushro, all right.

He saw Docia come out of the house and get into the carriage. He held the glasses on her face for as long as he could. He could not make out her eyes. Were they shining as they had been yesterday?

He waited until the carriage was out of sight, marking the direction it took. He saddled the horses and galloped down to the house. The beat of hoofs brought Dane out onto the porch.

His face was bitter and sullen. Jessie thought, more words between him and Docia.

Dane shook his head in answer to Jessie's question. "I don't know where she goes. She's went off a half dozen times this way." He looked sort of helpless. I—I never followed them."

Jessie understood. It would go against the grain for the kid to be trailing his mother. There was probably a little fear mixed in it, too. Jessie knew Docia.

He said, "Climb on. We'll follow them this time."

Dane's face brightened as he swung into the saddle.

Jessie hurried the horses along the direction the carriage had taken. The marks of its wheels would hold for awhile in this dusty country, and with no wind, dust

raised by its passage would settle slowly.

He lost the tracks in some rocky ground and had to patiently work it out. He found them again and moved ahead slowly. He did not want to get too close. He did not want to be detected.

He stopped at every high spot and swept the surrounding country with the glasses. From the last hilltop, he could see the muddy, sullen Rio Grande River. Mexico lay just beyond that river. That worried him. A lot of unwholesome things came out of Mexico. What was Docia doing?

He slowly moved the glasses and finally saw them on top of a fairly high hill. They were just getting into the carriage. Behind them was a pile of freshly turned dirt. A little shiver coursed through him. What was buried under that dirt?

He said, "We'll give them time to get away. This still Docia's land?"

Dane nodded. Questions crawled all over his face, but he held his tongue. A good kid, Jessie thought. He knows when to talk and when not to.

HE WAITED an hour before he remounted. He did not think the carriage would return. They rode up to the top of the hill and swung down beside the pile of dirt. Nothing had been buried there. But something had been uncovered.

The hole was down some four feet. It was a brand-new hole. Some of the rocks projecting from its sides were still firmly embedded. The dirt at the bottom of the hole seemed more loose, particularly at one side. Jessie kicked at it, and his boot toe went in quite a way. He could not kick a hole in the rest of the wall like that. He climbed out of the hole, and his eyes had a soft fire in them.

Dane said, "What is it, Jessie? What was buried here?"

Jessie shook his head. He did not know —yet. He moved off the crest of the hill and cast around. He found the tunnel opening in the west side of the hill. It had been filled in, but the marks of its recent digging were plain. It was not a large tunnel, but a small man could crawl through it. Jessie judged it was some ten feet to the bottom of that hole by way of this tunnel. Something had been put in the end of the tunnel before it was filled in. Whatever the object or objects were, the dirt over them would show no signs of disturbance. Anyone digging in that spot would think he was the first in years.

He looked out across the muddy river again before he remounted. Mexico! A lot of tall tales came out of that country. Tales of silver and gold pack trains. Lost trains with their treasure gone from man's knowledge. The fire burned brighter in his eyes.

Dane asked, "We going home now?"

"We've got some business in town first. Maybe those two friends of yours will never come back."

Twenty times during the ride to town Jessie felt Dane's searching eyes upon him. But the kid never asked a question. The more Jessie saw of him, the more he approved.

They walked into the Frontier Hotel, and Jessie said to the clerk, "Gourley is expecting us." He grinned at the startled flash in Dane's eyes.

They went up the steps and down the narrow, dingy hall. At the door of room 215, Jessie slid his gun out of its holster. He grinned at the look on Dane's face. He listened heard the soft murmur of voices coming from the room.

He rapped on the door, and the voices broke off.

"Who is it?" the deep voice yelled.

Jessie said, "Message for you."

The rumbling voice said, "Celso, open the door."

The squeak of a key sounded, and Mushro's narrow, suspicious face showed in the partially opened door. Jessie thrust hard at the door with his shoulder. Its edge crashed into Mushro's face, and his startled squawk broke off midway. The force of the opening door sent him stumbling back into the room, and Jessie bounded after him. He felt Dane's breath on his neck and told him to lock the door.

## CHAPTER V

### *The Confession*

HE HAD an easy grin on his lips, and the gun did not directly point at anyone. The grin did not extend to his eyes. They were cold.

Mushro wiped a thin line of blood from his cheek where the edge of the door had caught him. Gourley's mouth was slowly closing. He advanced a few steps and said in a blustering voice, "What's the meaning of this? How dare you break into our room?" He looked at the gun, and its significance struck him for the first time. His voice was whisper-like. "Is this a robbery?"

Jessie said, "That's already been done." His eyes swept the half packed carpetbag on the bed. "You boys fixing to go someplace?"

The softness of his tone reassured Gourley. "Get out," he screeched. "Get out, or I'll call the law."

"You don't want the law," Jessie murmured. "Not with what you boys been doing." His tone popped like the lash of a whip. "Where's Docia's money?"

Gourley could not keep his lips from jerking. "I don't know what you're talking about," he mumbled.

"You buried something, then took her to it. You dug it up while she was there. I'm thinking it was some kind of fake treasure. If it was real, you'd never have told anyone else about it. Docia paid you money for information how to find that treasure."

"Dane." He spoke without turning his head. "Look in that bag."

Mushro started to intercept him, and Jessie said, "I wouldn't." Mushro fell back, his eyes darting to Gourley. Gourley could not help him. He stood there opening and closing his hands.

Dane scattered garments on the bed. Then he pulled out several sheets of aged-looking parchment.

Jessie's eye glistened. "A map drawn on a piece of that would look right real." His eyes switched to Gourley. "Maybe you'd better tell us about it, and make it real quick.

Gourley's face was sullen. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Jessie said, "Dane. Maybe you can sort of refresh their memories."

Dane's face was puzzled. He looked uncertainly at the two, then back at Jessie questioningly.

Jessie grinned. It was a cold grin as chilling as an Arctic wind. "Sometimes a knock on the head kind of restores lost memory."

"Dane's face went eager, and a big hand knotted. He roared; "What have you been doing to Mom? And where's her money?"

Gourley said, "You're both as crazy as—"

Dane's fist plowed into his mouth, cutting the words off short. Gourley went stumbling backward. The edge of the bed broke his knees, and he fell backward across it. He lay there, his eyes dazed, mopping at the blood on his lips.

MUSHRO sprang at Dane's back. Jessie held his warning. The kid was already whipping around. He could take care of himself.

Mushro's blow landed on Dane's cheek. Dane shook his head, then clubbed Mushro in the stomach, doubling him over. He smashed a fist into Mushro's face, lifting him off his feet and slamming him into a wall. The room shook with the impact. Gourley was on his feet and rushing at Dane. His eyes were wild, and blood streaked his chin. He got in close, wrapping those huge arms about him. Dane struggled and pushed at him to get him away, to find enough room to swing a fist. Gourley's clawing hand fastened on Dane's shoulder. Jessie heard a ripping sound, and half of Dane's shirt went. Gourley tramped Dane's toes, he butted him in the chin with his head. He was a rough fighter. He knew all the tricks.

Mushro was on his feet again, his steps unsteady, but still on his feet. He moved

in to where he could get a clear swing at Dane.

Jessie was afraid the odds were too great and started to interfere. He decided against it. Dane had a lot of mad to work off. It should make the odds about even.

Mushro jumped and landed on Dane's back, carrying all three to the floor. They rolled over and over, a clawing, kicking mass. A chair overturned before them, and one leg dug into Mushro's back. He let out a squawk. Gourley swore in a steady stream.

The room bounced and thumped. Mushro yelled, and Gourley cursed. Jessie watched with bright eyes. Maybe it was too much for the kid. He heard a pounding on the door behind him, and the clerk yelled, "What's going on in there? Open this door."

Jessie called, "Go away. It's just a friendly little ruckus."

The clerk screamed, "I'll get the sheriff. If you don't stop, I'll get—" His words faded, and Jessie heard the pound of his feet down the hall.

Dane was going to have to do better. They had some things to clear up before the law got here.

The thought must have reached Dane. He slammed a knee into Gourley's stomach, doubling the big man. Gourley's arms fell away, and Dane pulled clear and struggled to his feet. Mushro was still on his back, his hands clawing for a better hold. Dane bent over, and his shoulders snapped like a bowstring. The grip he had on Mushro's hair helped. Mushro sailed through the air. His face hit the poster of the bed. It made a wreck of his nose. He slid to the floor and sat there, making animal whimpering noises.

Gourley's face was pea-green. He was on his feet, but he was not very effectual. Dane was a wild man. Scratches crisscrossed his chest and back, and he had a swelling bruise under one eye. He rushed at Gourley and sledged him in the face. Gourley's eyes rolled back up into his head, and he slowly toppled. Dane hit him twice more on the way down.

He whirled to grab the little man, and Jessie said, "Make him talk, Dane. They ought to have some of the money left, and I'd like to know a few details."

DANE grabbed Mushro by the collar and hauled him to his feet. Mushro's collar ripped and tore loose, and Dane switched his grip to his shirt front. Mushro's toes barely touched the floor, and he hung in Dane's grip like a sack of old rags. He kept up a pleading whimpering.

Dane slapped him, first on one side, then on the other. "Where's Mom's money?" His voice sounded like iron filings scraping across glass. "Where's Mom's money?" He punctuated each word with a slap.

Jessie watched with bright, interested eyes. Dane was a terror. A man would have to check-rein him now and then and funnel that ferocity in the right direction.

Mushro's head rocked under the blows. His face grew as red as fresh beefsteak. He screamed, "Stop it, stop it. I can't stand any more." He broke into wild sobbing, and Dane waited, that big hand still raised.

Mushro sobbed, "In that brown boot under the bed."

Jessie moved to the bed and fished out the boot. He reached down inside the toe and pulled out a tight roll of bills. He broke the string and counted the money. He held a little better than six thousand dollars in his hand. It was not all the money these two had taken. Sumner had said Docia drew out seven thousand and sold some cattle besides. Part of the money was gone. Jessie supposed these two had spent it. But Docia would be lucky to get this much back.

He thrust the money into his pocket and asked, "What did you hide, Celso?"

"Gold bars," Mushro sobbed. "We told her they were from a Spanish pack train that was besieged by Indians. The Spaniards hid the money before they were killed. One man got away and later drew maps of the locations. She was buying those maps."

Fake gold bars, Jessie knew. He sighed. Docia, Docia. If you did not have to do

things your own way, you would not get into trouble like this. He guessed that would never change about her.

He heard a pounding on the door and turned his head. A new voice said, "Open up there." A lot of authority was in that voice. It was not like the frightened squeal of the clerk's.

"You gonna open up," the voice roared, "or do I break it down?"

"Coming," Jessie called. He put his face close to Mushro's. "It would be bad if anyone else knew about this. You two would go to jail for a long, long time. We're giving you a chance to get out of town if you keep your mouths shut." He was satisfied with the terror in Mushro's face. This would kill Docia if it ever got out. Docia had too much pride to ever be a laughing-stock.

He said to Dane, "Let me handle it, kid."

He unlocked the door, and the sheriff strode in. His anger made him red-faced. He looked at the wrecked room, at Gourley unconscious on the floor, at Mushro sobbing on the bed. "What the hell's going on?" he roared.

Jessie's hands were empty. He said easily, "Those two made some remarks about Docia that got back to Dane. I just came along in case he needed help. He didn't."

The sheriff's eyes lost some of their anger. He grumbled, "It's a hell of a note to bust the peace this away."

Jessie's eyes were innocent. "You wouldn't stand for anyone making remarks about your mother, would you, Sheriff?"

The sheriff's jaw looked like an iron block. "I sure wouldn't," he said with conviction. "I sure wouldn't." He looked at Dane. "You satisfied?"

The wildness was gone from Dane's face. His eyes were shining. "I'm satisfied."

The sheriff looked at Mushro. "Get out of here. I'll give you an hour, then I'm coming after you."

He followed Jessie and Dane out and shut the door. His grin was friendly. "Musta been interesting."

"You don't know how interesting," Jessie murmured. He went out into the street with Dane. "We've got to get you a new shirt, boy."

"Did you get all the money back, Jessie?"

"Not all of it, but we did pretty well." He was satisfied, but the loneliness was coming back. He would see Docia, then he would be drifting on.

## CHAPTER VI

### *Duped*

DOCIA'S eyes were frightened as she looked at Dane's bruised face.

"He's all right, Docia," Jessie said. "We had an argument with Gourley and Mushro."

[*Turn page*]

*Read and thrill to:*

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The color drained from Docia's face, and her eyes were frightened. She gasped, "What—what are you talking about?"

"They told us, Docia. You been buying fake gold bars."

Her face had that old stubborn cast. "I have not. They're real. I'll show you."

Jessie's loneliness was growing. Her eyes always snapped when she was mad this way.

She led the way to the barn. She went inside and tugged aside a couple of bales of hay. She reached into a small recess and pulled out a yellow bar about the size of a brick. Her face was filled with triumph. "There."

Jessie hefted the brick. Light for gold. He supposed it was brass, carefully aged to give it that old, authentic look. He looked into the recess. She had about twenty of the things hidden there.

"I have enough," Docia said "Let the poor relatives of those murdered men find the rest. I won't buy any more maps."

Jessie shook his head in disbelief. "That's what they told you? That's what kept you from checking and finding out if these things were real? You were going to wait until you found enough before you let the information out."

Docia's eyes were uncertain. Her voice was not more than a whisper. "I paid for the maps. But Mr. Gourley and Mr. Mushro were going to share in what we found. They thought it best I keep them all until we were through." An anguished look was stealing across her face. "They're real, Jessie. They trusted me. They wouldn't have if—" She gulped, and the words stuck in her throat.

Jessie shook his head and pulled the roll of bills from his pocket. He handed it to Docia. "Some of it's gone, but you're lucky to have that much left. They drew those maps themselves. Dane and I found where they planted the bars."

Dane kept nodding, his face solemn.

Docia stared from one face to the other. She recognized truth on those solemn faces. Bitter tears filled her eyes and spilled out onto her cheeks. "I was only doing it for Dane," she wailed. "The ranch was so run-down. I wanted it to be like Dad left it."

Jessie's face was impatient. He seized her by the shoulders, resisting the impulse to shake her. "Docia, when will you ever learn to let your men-folk handle things? No man wants a woman handing him anything on a silver platter. Dane wouldn't."

SHE STARED at him a long moment. She looked like a little girl with her face all twisted up and her eyes spilling tears. He had to lean forward to catch her voice. "I've been wrong, haven't I, Jessie? I've been so wrong."

"You've been wrong," he said in a steady voice. He released her shoulders and started for the door. She ran around in front of him and cried, "Jessie, where are you going?"

"I'll be drifting on," he said, and the sadness was back in his voice. His grin did not come right. "I don't know where."

"You can't, Jessie," she pleaded. "Dane and I need help. You saved the money for me. You earned part of it."

He looked at Dane. The kid had an anxious, entreating look in his eyes. Jessie shook his head, a slow, determined gesture. He reached out a hand to push her out of the way. "No, Docia—" he started.

She whirled and ran to the barn door. She picked up a pitchfork leaning against the wall. Her face had that determined set. "I won't let you leave. If you don't promise to stay, I swear I'll run you through." Her face crumbled, and she wailed, "Don't make me say it, Jessie. Leave me a little pride."

He stared at her, and the cold loneliness inside him was breaking up. He could feel it melting away. She needed him. Maybe this was as close as she would ever come to admitting it, but it was in her eyes. The slow grin spread over his face.

"I believe you would stick me, Docia. I believe you would." He forgot all about Dane as he reached for her. • • •

*It took old Mort Cleland to show 'em*

*that the man with the biggest mouth*

*ain't always the one who lives longest*

The young fellow did a grand job of keeping himself covered

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

# Flat-Country Sheriff

AS THE RIFLE shot echoed and re-echoed through the mountain peaks and along the lofty ledges, Deputy Sheriff Mort Cleland pulled up his horse sharply. There were two outlaws ahead of him, but he knew the shot wasn't for him. Unless he had lost his cunning this late in life, and he didn't think this possible, the outlaws didn't know he was on their trail.

He heard the bullet strike a rock and glance with its deadly song, then thud into a tree. He looked down. A young man had hastily tumbled from his horse, and gun in hand, was working his way through the stunted trees and brush up the steep slope toward his attackers.

Suddenly the man changed his mind and with extreme caution returned to the trail. He did a grand job of keeping himself covered as he brought his horse to him with a sharp whistle.

"By golly!" Mort exclaimed. "If that cuss is the kind of a youngster I think he is, then he's the answer to my prayer. Hell, I can chase outlaws most any time, but . . . men like him don't grow on bushes. Still, I've hoped before and things turned out bad."

Mort was waiting in the trail when the young man rode up. He was in his early twenties, ruggedly built, with black, curly hair and steady blue eyes. He had a mouth that could smile easily or grow hard if the occasion demanded.

He noticed the deputy sheriff's badge and said, "Want to question me?" Mort nodded. "Name's Lonnie Lee. Twenty-two, high school education, cowboy, rancher or whatever else is handy when the poke is low."

"You were shot at," Mort said. "Why didn't you go after the cuss? You started."

"I'm a stranger in a strange land," Lonnie answered slowly. "It isn't always healthy to be free with your gun, even when you figure you're in the right. I'm minding my own business and suddenly I'm attacked."

"That's right," Mort said. "And you showed uncommon good sense. You're the man I'm looking for."

"What?" Lonnie was amazed.

"I need a special kind of young fellow to take my place in what is known as Hurricane Precinct, which is one of the biggest precincts in one of the West's biggest counties. It's outlaw country some of the time, and the mountain folks are wild, hard-drinking, hot-tempered people."

MORT CLELAND'S problem was common enough in all small communities. The young fellows grow up and distant fields look greener. They leave. This leaves the girls without opportunity to marry and make homes of their own. They either leave also, or stay and often marry a local boy without ambition, or some no-good drifter looking for a soft spot.

Hurricane Mountain needed its young men and girls—girls like Kathy Brent. There were opportunities at home and Mort had suggested them to various young fellows, but unless they recognized them as such and grew enthusiastic, there was no sense in urging them to stay.

The more Mort looked at Lonnie Lee, the better he liked him, but Mort had learned the hard way, first impressions aren't always good. Things had to go wrong before you could tell about a man. "Lonnie," he said, "I can use a man right about now. What do you say?"

"If it's legally going after the man who tried to drygulch me," Lonnie said, "I'm for it."

"He probably thought you was a deputy," Mort said. "Stick up your hand and be sworn in."

"Who are these men and what did they do?" Lonnie asked.

"Reagan brothers—drifted up from the border," Mort answered. "Tried to hold up a mine pay roll, but the manager, on horseback, made a run for it and reported to me. His horse was creased and his hat was drilled slicker'n a whistle."

For the next hour the old deputy set a fast pace, following game trails, taking short cuts and leading his horse across dangerous slide areas. "Breathin' kinda hard, Lonnie," he observed. "That's because you ain't used to the thin air in this high altitude. Fools a lot of husky men. The Reagan boys are just ahead."

"Gunfight?" Lonnie's voice was hopeful and Mort liked that.

"Not the ordinary kind," Mort answered. "Not the kind where we shoot and they shoot back and we sneak up and try to get the drop on 'em. In the old days the Indians didn't yell when they attacked to get the dust out of their throats. They'd learned yelling can confuse the defenders. Besides, if you and I yell, each of us feels we ain't alone. It helps. Shoot wild with your left gun, but keep your right gun ready for business if it gets down to killin'."

"I get it," Lonnie said. "A dead outlaw is sort of a tinhorn hero in some people's eyes, but a live outlaw, brought in, looks like . . . like . . . ."

"Like a woman's Easter bonnet that's been left out in the rain," Mort said. They dismounted and slowly advanced. The Reagans had selected a spot affording natural defense. The trail at this point skirted a tangle of boulders and brush. They were behind the boulders which commanded a view of the trail. "You move in from the right, Lonnie," Mort whispered, "and I'll go in from the left. When I yell, the fun begins."

The Reagans were completely relaxed when the mountain stillness was broken by yelling. Lonnie and Mort, shooting wildly, converged on the boulders. The Reagans whipped out their weapons and fired as wildly, then suddenly dropped them and raised their hands. They were pale and shaken and one was whimpering, "Don't kill me, Sheriff!"

"Watch 'em, Lonnie," Mort ordered, then he climbed over the rocks, searched the men and handcuffed them.

It was evening when they arrived at Hurricane Mountain. Mort locked the prisoners in the small jail, then said, "Wash up, Lonnie, and we'll go over to Brent's for a square meal. It isn't a regular eating place. If you're around meal time you eat with the family and pay."

Lonnie Lee was glad he had slicked up. Kathy Brent, slim, blond, blue-eyed, brisk and smiling, waited on table. Her father made him feel like one of the family and Lonnie asked Mort on the way home, "What's the chance of getting on the pay roll?"

"You're on," Mort answered. "Tomorrow you take the prisoners down to Carney City and turn 'em over to Pete Manning. He's sheriff of Juniper County."

LONNIE returned in a disturbed state of mind. "There's a back-slapper named Ed Purdy running against Pete Manning for the sheriff job."

"Makes the usual claims, I suppose," Mort said. "The sheriff gives his friends soft jobs, wastes money and all that."

Lonnie nodded. "A man helping him get elected claimed you are a grafter. Said you rented horses to the Sheriff. I called him a liar. It was quite a fight."

"Ed Purdy will have to get up early to beat Pete Manning," Mort said. "Fact is, I never heard of Purdy."

"He's got quite an organization. Claims it's time the sheriff setup was streamlined. Says it might have been all right in the old days, but they're done for," Lonnie reported.

"It's been my experience that men thrown out of office don't die," Mort said. "I'm almost seventy and I've seen a lot of 'em come and go. I survived several changes because I made up my mind to know this country better than any other damned man who might want my job. Now you saddle up first thing in the morning and learn every road, trail, game trail and hide-out hereabouts. When you run out of grub, come in, load up and go out again."

In the days following, Mort noticed Lonnie's grub ran out about Friday, which brought him into Hurricane Mountain in time for the Saturday night dance and . . . Kathy.

He came in election day and that evening he said, "What do we do now, Mort, resign? Purdy was elected."

"Nope," Mort answered. "Let him fire us. But it might not come to that. See that big tree out there? I've been watching it for years. A man can learn plenty from nature. The tree don't snap off when the wind hits it. It *bends*. Let's try bending with the Purdy wind."

The new sheriff appeared several weeks after election. Mort realized success had gone to the young man's head. "Gets sixty percent of the votes because more people live in the flat country," he muttered, "and acts as if it was a hundred percent."

He introduced himself with a slight swagger and Mort shook the soft hand—the first soft-handed sheriff the county had ever elected. Former sheriffs' hands were calloused and many carried knuckle

scars from knock-down, drag-out fights and rope burns.

"This is sort of out of the way," Mort observed, "but things happen. Cattle rustling breaks out now and again. You'll notice the Gunsight Pass highway—if you can call it a highway—runs parallel to the railroad. It's kinda handy for freight car thieves. They bust open a freight car, dump the stuff into the brush and members of the gang, in cars, pick up the loot. It ain't missed sometimes until the train reaches the Pacific coast.

"Lots of tunnels, it's a hard climb, trains crawl even with two or three engines," Mort continued, "so the thieves, workin' on a car in the middle of the train, can't be seen by men in the caboose, when it's still in the tunnel."

"You can explain all that to the new deputy, Lem Braddock," Purdy said. "I gave you a chance to resign, Cleland, but you waited to be fired and you're . . . fired. Lonnie Lee goes with you. I haven't liked the setup here at all. You cost the county too much money."

IT SEEMS like you don't come very cheap," Mort said. "New car right off the bat and. . . ."

"I believe in spending money to save money," Purdy said. "Instead of using horses from the sheriff's saddle string, the former sheriff, Pete Manning, hired your horses. Things like that look bad. It proved you were getting more than your pay through horse hire. It was downright trickery. When I learned Manning was hiring your horses for work in the mountain country while the sheriff's saddle string ate their heads off in idleness, it burned me up."

"Hmmmm," Mort said, looking at the tree bending in the wind. "How're you going to handle this? Keep some of the sheriff's string up here, eating their heads off while waitin' for somethin' to happen?"

"Hell, no! I'm buying horse trailers," Sheriff Purdy snapped. "Putting horses on wheels. When there's a crime, a posse of picked men on picked horses will move on wheels to the end of the road nearest the crime, then go into action. The horses and men will be fresh. If the outlaws are mounted, their mounts will be tiring. It will cost the county a little money at the start, but will pay off in the long run. Now don't you admit it sounds reasonable?"

"It sure does *sound* reasonable," Mort said.

"Why did you say it like that?" Purdy sharply demanded.

"Sometimes things don't turn out the way they *sound*," Mort answered. "Whenever Lem Braddock shows up, I'll turn the office and county property over to him. Horses, saddles, rifles, shotguns, revolvers, handcuffs and the things sheriffs use when chasing outlaws, belong to me. It seems like flat country county officials never could find money for the mountain part of the county's needs."

"Lem will take charge the first of the month," Purdy said. He rolled away in his new car, leaving dust eddies to slowly settle on the mountain road.

"Got a lot to learn," Mort said. "Winning elections is heady stuff at times. If he'd have been decent, I would've told him a few little tricks about sheriffin' in this neck of the woods."

"He would have thought you were trying to hang onto your job," Lonnie said. "I'm betting Braddock is cut from the same piece of cloth."

"A safe bet," Mort said.

"Now about . . . us?" Lonnie asked.

"That tree's still bendin' with the wind," Mort answered, "Are you askin' for advice?" Lonnie nodded. "If I was a young fellow, in love with Kathy, I'd figger to take root. It's spring. Plantin' time. Rich cusses from the big cities come up here for the trout fishin'. They hire horses and men to pack 'em in. I'll supply the horses and you do the guide work and packin' in."

"I'll hang around and scratch out a living," Lonnie said. "Do you think the bank will sell me the old Gilmour place? Forty acres, neat cabin, twenty acres cleared. . . ."

"And a hundred and sixty acres adjoin-

in' if a man figgers to grow," Mort interrupted. "Seems to me your clothes fit kinda loose, leavin' growin' room. The bank will be tickled to death to sell you the Gilmour place for just what it's got in it. You'll need a little money for down payment. I'll loan it to you. You take tonight's local train down to the flat country and be on hand when the bank opens up in the mornin'."

AS THE westbound train crawled into Hurricane Mountain after the long, hard climb from the prairie country far below, Mort joined the score of people who had come to the little station to greet friends or relatives, or just to watch the train's arrival and break up the day's routine.

Kathy Brent, brisk, pretty and smiling, stepped to Mort's side. "I'm mailing a letter," she said, gesturing toward the mail car. "I hear the new deputy is arriving. I'm told he's the best looking man in the county."

"So they claim, so they claim," Mort said. "It's been my experience that looks don't help in sheriffin' unless the sheriff is working on a woman who has information. Never did see good looks stop a bullet."

She laughed. "I haven't seen much of Lonnie lately."

Mort saw an opportunity to get in some missionary work. "He's bought the Gilmour place, you know." She nodded. "Been right busy, plantin' and cleanin' up. Deepened the spring to increase the water flow; put in a little timber and earth dam so there'd be plenty of irrigatin' water when the dry spell comes along. Ran a pipe from the dam to the house. Claims he ain't goin' to have his wife bustin' her back packin' water in buckets."

"Wife?" she asked sharply. "I didn't know he was even engaged."

"Ain't engaged," Mort said. "But if I know women, and I think I do, they won't let Lonnie's kind stay single long. They'll catch him and see that he gets the right kind of meals and not ruin his stomach with man-cooked stuff. Well, the passengers are gettin' off and . . . hmmmm . . . if that's Braddock, he *is* good lookin'. Acts to me like somebody must've mentioned his good looks in his presence."

The five ladies on the platform were staring at the tall, dark, broad-shouldered man in the tailored blue-black suit who had jumped lightly to the platform and was looking about. As the train pulled away, he faced the Pullmans and waved at three different girls, then he turned and asked, "Are you Mort Cleland?" Mort nodded. "I'm Braddock."

They shook hands and Braddock looked at Kathy and whistled softly. Kathy heard him and an amused smile played around her lips. "Does she live here, Cleland?" he asked in a low tone.

"Yeah," Mort answered.

Braddock glanced quickly at Kathy's left hand. "No engagement or wedding ring. Hmmmm. I think I'll like this job, after all."

He took Braddock to Kathy and said, "I'd like you to meet the new deputy Lem Braddock. Braddock will be around for awhile."

"Awhile?" Braddock said sharply. "I'm up here for good."

"Nothin' as uncertain as politics," Mort said.

"Sheriff Purdy and I are just like that," Braddock said, crossing his fingers.

"But you won't be just like that if you don't handle your job and the howls you think come from wolves are really from taxpayers' throats," Mort said. "By the way, son, have you ever been shot at?"

"Well . . . no," Braddock admitted.

"Quite an experience," Mort mildly observed. "Man never knows how he'll turn out until lead flies."

Braddock made no comment. He turned to Kathy and said, "I'd like to see you."

"I come in every day for the mail," she answered, "and I'm usually visible to the naked eye."

When Mort and Braddock arrived at the office, the old deputy had his things packed. They checked the items the county owned, Braddock signed for them, and

Mort said, "Well, good luck Braddock. My guess is you'll need it."

MORT carried his belongings to his buckboard, loaded them in back, then drove out to his home—a snug cabin in a clearing a half mile from Hurricane Mountain. His saddle and pack strings were in the pasture and he leaned on the fence rail and noted their condition. "The way to get used to being unemployed," he mused, "is to get busy on the things you've put off because you was employed."

There were repairs to be made about the house, harness to oil, saddles to put in shape for packing and riding, camp gear to check and horses to be shod. Adjoining the barn was a small shop in which he did his shoeing and blacksmith work.

He mended fence for several hours, then saddled up and rode to Lonnie's place. Lonnie wasn't in sight, the dishes were unwashed and it was obvious he was living out of tin cans. "Didn't even make up his bunk," Mort grumbled. "Danged if I ain't disappointed in that boy."

He heard lusty swearing at the creek and walked over. Lonnie, smeared with muck, was levering boulders onto a stone boat—a very low sled, built to carry weight. Two horses were hitched to the stone boat. Mort jumped into the creek bed, picked up a lever and gave him a hand.

"Thanks," Lonnie said. "Let's smoke and catch our breaths. The creek's down. It looked like a good time to haul boulders up to the bend. Every time high water comes, it eats into the bank. I figure two acres of black bottom land went downstream this spring. Real high water would cut straight through, leave a five-acre island, then eat away the island."

"By golly you're right," Mort said.

"If I could afford it, I'd buy dynamite, break up these big boulders and they'd be easy to handle," Lonnie said. "As it is, I'm doing it the hard way." He looked sharply at Mort. "Has Braddock taken over? And is he as handsome as he's claimed to be? And has he met Kathy?"

"The answer to all three questions is *yes*," Mort said.

"I was supposed to take Kathy to the dance Saturday night," Lonnie said slowly. "Well, I can't. The creek's down and I'll never have a better chance to lick it."

"I'll tell Kathy," Mort said.

"Are you still watching that big tree bend?" Lonnie asked. Mort nodded. "Have you anything in mind for me? Where I can make a few extra bucks? I want to keep up my bank payments and pay you back, too. This ranch isn't going to produce for awhile. I'll plant spuds, corn, barley. I've made a deal to graze a few calves."

"I've a couple of little deals in mind," Mort said.

"Mort, I could sure have moved ahead if we could have kept our deputy sheriff jobs," Lonnie said. "Funny thing, when a man's a drifter, he never thinks about socking away a few dollars against a rainy day. Then he meets a girl like Kathy. . ."

"I know," Mort said. "And you've got quite a bunch of money salted away and don't know it. You can't draw on it for a year or so, but . . ."

"Where?"

"Gilmour cleared this land forty years ago," Mort said. "Sold the trees to the railroad. He found out he couldn't handle so much land and it reseeded itself. Those trees will make first class telephone poles. There's talk of renewing the line next year. You can deliver poles along here cheaper and at a higher profit to you than anyone else. See if the bank won't loan you the money to buy it."

"It's worth a try," Lonnie answered. "I could clean up big and I'd still have the land. Might get ties and fence posts out of the smaller stuff. Wouldn't be much time for courting if I take all this on."

"If Kathy and you was married," Mort said, "you could do your courtin' right at home and save long rides."

"Do you court 'em after you're married?" Lonnie asked.

"If you're smart son, you never stop courtin' 'em."

"You're up to something that will bring me in a little money," Lonnie said. "I'll see Mr. Anders at the bank and make a deal on that telephone pole land."

"It's called the Gilmour Forty," Mort said.

He worked with Lonnie until he was tired, then rode home. The following morning he called on Kathy. "Lonnie's tryin' to lick the creek durin' the low water period. He can't get in Saturday night." He grinned. "It ain't too late for a popular girl like you to line up another fellow."

She was thoughtful. "I think I'll let Lem Braddock take me. I'd like to get better acquainted. I've never met his kind before."

"Takes all kind of folks to make the world," Mort said. "Lem Braddock's one of the kind."

TWO WEEKS passed before Lonnie managed to take time off for a trip to the county seat. He had lost weight, but he had protected his property against any high water that might roar down the creek.

"Fishing's good," he reported. "Got any parties to take out, Mort?"

"Next week," Mort answered.

Kathy arrived breathlessly a few minutes before the train came downgrade with smoking brake shoes. "I'll be back tomorrow," Lonnie said. "Wish me luck, Kathy. I want that Gilmour Forty and they claim Mr. Anders is a hard-headed man who leans on the conservative side."

"Good luck, Lonnie," the girl said quietly.

Kathy and Mort were on hand when Lonnie returned late the following afternoon. He smiled grimly and shook his head. "Mr. Anders said I was getting in too deep for a man without a job. He knows what I can make helping you out, Mort, as packer and guide. He says it isn't enough. I told him the country needed young, willing men. He said that was just the point. If I bit off more than I could chew and lost my shirt, it would discourage others. While I think I can swing it, I saw his point, too."

"Jobs are hard to find," Kathy said. "Mother and I want you to have supper with us tonight."

"That's the best sounding words I've heard in a long time," Lonnie said. "See you later, Mort."

After supper they sat in the hammock and Kathy broke a long, pleasant silence. "I think you were sensible in getting Mr. Anders' point of view on the Gilmour Forty, Lonnie."

"I'm not giving it up," he said. "I'll try to pick up more work somewhere, then convince him I can swing it. Of course, if some other fellow comes along and picks it up, I'm out of luck."

"That's not likely to happen," she said. "It's been untouched for years."

He started to take her in his arms and ask her to marry him, then hesitated. If she loved him, he knew she would gamble with him on the future. But Lonnie wanted less of a gamble and more of a sure thing before he took the next step. He kissed her several times and left, with heart pounding, and the feeling that he could lick the world.

Several days later Mort dropped in on him. As usual, Lonnie had neglected the dishes for hard work outside. They were stacked up in a pan in the sink. Otherwise, the kitchen was clean and the food put away.

"Take it easy," Mort advised, "there'll be work to be done after you're dead and gone, Lonnie."

"I want that Gilmour Forty," Lonnie said. "I'm getting things in shape here."

"That's why I came over," Mort said. "Braddock bought that property. Now take it easy."

"Easy . . . I'm going to beat the hell out of him!"

"I gave you your chance here," Mort said slowly. "Introduced you to Kathy and all that. You know why? Because I figgered you could hang onto your temper and do the sensible thing. Now reason this out."

"It's a dirty trick, by a man making a play for Kathy," Lonnie said lowly, "but

he had the right. Anders said he would try to hold it until my affairs were better, but he had to sell."

"He upped the price for Braddock," Mort said, and Lonnie felt better. Not much, but some. "It will make you neighbors," Mort added for the effect it would produce.

"No it won't," Lonnie answered. "There isn't room enough here for both of us."

IT BECAME evident to Mort, several days later, that Braddock felt the same way about it and that he had an idea he might pick up Lonnie's property at a forced sale. He saw Braddock prowling over the Gilmour Forty, then he stopped at Lonnie's property line. He studied the cabin and the improvements Lonnie had made a long time. Then he smiled and nodded his head as if confirming something he had been thinking. He started to leave, then deciding Lonnie wasn't home, approached and knocked on the door.

Obviously pleased to find Lonnie away, Braddock peered into each window. Then he began pacing off various distances and jotting them down in a notebook.

He knows Lonnie's doing business on a shoestring, Mort thought wrathfully, and he's fixin' to finish him off.

Then Lonnie sauntered from a thicket and Mort knew Braddock had been under observation from the beginning. Mort liked Lonnie's deadly calm. He walked slowly toward the two men. They glanced his way, then faced each other. "Got a warrant for me, Braddock?" Lonnie asked. Braddock shook his head. "Then what in hell are you snooping around my cabin for?"

Lonnie moved closer and Braddock drew his gun. "Keep your distance," he warned, "I'm not looking for trouble."

"You've been looking for nothing else since you came to Hurricane Mountain," Lonnie retorted. "Put down that damned gun."

"You're asking for my lead," Braddock snapped.

"One way for a deputy not yet dry behind the ears to get his rear in a sling is to invade private property without a warrant and throw a gun on the owner," Lonnie said. "Drop that damned gun."

"Two against one," Braddock said, glancing at Mort.

"Nope," Mort said. "Man against man. I'm just a witness. And if it gets into court, I'll tell the truth, whoever it hurts."

Braddock dropped his gun and put up his fists. Lonnie moved in, left jabbing, keeping Braddock off balance. Braddock's guard went up and Lonnie's blow to the stomach sounded like a mule kicking a sack of wheat. Braddock clenched, then drove his knee into Lonnie's groin. Lonnie dropped in agony, then got to his feet. His face was ashen. "If that's the way you want it, you dirty buzzard, that's the way it will be."

He circled warily, then began chopping away at Braddock's face. A lusty swing almost shifted the man's nose off of its base. It bled furiously. Lonnie took a couple of hard blows, then banged Braddock's right ear. It began to swell. He smashed his nose again, then split an eyebrow and polished off both eyes. Then slipping with Braddock's punches, he went to work on the man's stomach. Down came the guard and Lonnie smashed him on the jaw.

Braddock's knees buckled, his eyes glazed, then he dropped. Lonnie fell on his knees, sick at the stomach from the groin punch. When he finished heaving, he struggled to his feet and waited. Braddock tried to get up. Either his legs, or his heart was unwilling to fight. "I'm . . . through," he muttered, ". . . for now."

"I see," Lonnie said. "To be continued in the next issue. I can play it that way, too."

Braddock picked up his sixgun. "You emptied my gun, Cleland," he accused.

"That's right," Mort admitted. "I was afraid you might lose your head, along with the fight, and do something you'd be sorry for. By the time you've reloaded, you'll have cooled off."

Braddock strapped on gun and holster

and walked uncertainly to his property. Mort followed Lonnie into the cabin. Lonnie dropped onto a cot. "That's one time he played into my hands, Mort," he said. "I didn't want to fight him over Kathy, nor the Gilmour Forty. But this was my chance. How'd I do?"

"Unless I'm plumb wrong," Mort answered, "you decorated his face so he won't be taking Kathy to no dance Saturday night."

"That was the idea," Lonnie answered. "When are we going to get the next installment of this business? I can hardly wait for the end."

"Search me," Mort answered. "But it won't be long." Once again he was banking on his knowledge of human nature, learned in his long career as a frontier peace officer.

MORT was enjoying supper at Kathy's home, Saturday night, when Lonnie appeared. He chuckled. "Playing second fiddle to Braddock?" he said. "He sent word he couldn't take Kathy to the dance."

"I'd already heard about the fight," Kathy said. "And I was sure he would break the date." She smiled faintly. "And I was glad."

She was full of business as she led Lonnie to the porch hammock. She knew why Mort had mentioned second fiddle. It was to bring things to a showdown. "Listen, Lonnie," she said, "you have never been second fiddle to Braddock or anyone else. From the moment I laid eyes on you I was sure you were all wool and a yard wide as my grandmother used to say. But some rather charming drifters have passed this way and I had to be sure. That's why I went out with Braddock. I wanted to learn whether, deep down, you were the jealous kind who would make a girl miserable because she danced with someone else, or listened to a new man who was very nice. I've seen a lot of it. Now . . . what about us?"

"What do you think?" he said, pulling her into his arms and kissing her hard.

She kissed him back . . . good and hard. "I think the same thing," she said.

"Will you marry me as soon as I can see light?" he asked. "Looking ahead right now, the timber's pretty thick."

"You're pretty fine, Lonnie," she answered. "But a girl in love, doesn't want to play a sure thing—doesn't want to wait until the man has won the fight. She'd like to be in on the gamble—to feel she, too, had taken a chance."

"I could lose my shirt," he said. "But . . . set the date."

"I'll let you know," Kathy answered.

He went home—very late—whistling like a lark and wondering where he

They didn't come tougher than
that mighty mite, the tamer of
wild Tamarack—Sad Sam Bones!

TOO TOUGH!

*Dramatic Frontier Saga*

by George Kilrain

*Coming in the Next Issue!*

would raise the money for a decent engagement ring. He was sure he knew the next day, when a telegram came. Fred McCall, a wealthy sportsman, hired him as a guide and packer on a fishing trip. Make good with McCall, he thought, and a lot of business will come my way.

He was putting in eighteen hours a day on his place in order to spare time for McCall when Mort galloped up. "Hell to pay and no pitch!" he shouted. "Three men boarded the express car, bound those aboard, blew a safe and left the train at tunnel seven. Now we'll see what a flat-country sheriff with streamlined equipment can do. Saddle up."

"We've no authority," Lonnie protested. "Besides, I'm expecting McCall."

"We can't miss this, Lonnie," Mort insisted. "Maybe a hundred-thousand-dollar holdup. Braddock left, hell-bent on a handcar."

A half hour later they were riding a game trail and when they dropped down to the highway, Braddock was standing there and Ed Purdy was pulling to a stop. His car was dragging a trailer containing two horses. Other cars and trailers followed.

"What're you doing here, Cleland?" Purdy demanded.

"Free country," Mort answered. "Lonnie and I came along to see the excitement."

Purdy looked at their horses, obviously a little tired from a quick ride. He glanced at his own fresh animals. "Think you can keep up?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," Mort replied.

THE POSSE, Purdy in the lead, took the trail. "The special deputy on the roan," Mort said to Lonnie, "is Bill Gates, reporter on the Mesquite News — nice cuss, even if he does live in the flat country. Purdy brought him along to glorify the new order of things."

Two hours' hard riding passed before the posse picked up a hot trail. Purdy increased the pace. "Our horses are as fresh as theirs," Lonnie said.

An hour later, the Purdy horses played out. Purdy gazed thoughtfully at Mort and Lonnie and Lonnie said, "He can't figure it out. He's dying, but he's dying hard."

"Need a couple of deputies?" Mort asked. "Or are you going to let those cusses get away?"

Bill Gates was listening. Now he looked searchingly at Purdy. "Mort did pretty well up this way for a long, long time," he said.

"Put up your hands and be sworn in," Purdy said.

"A few conditions," Mort insisted. "We're old-fashioned. We've too many bumps to be streamlined. We're handling this in our own way, without interference. Is that right "

"Go ahead," Purdy muttered. It was a bitter dose to swallow, but not as bad as failure. And if Mort and Lonnie failed, he could explain to the public that he had turned the chase over to a veteran peace officer.

Mort led off. They came to a game trail, followed it, then took a short cut. A rock rolled down from a switchback and Mort said, "There they are. I think we can cut them off." He burst from cover at top speed, followed by Lonnie. Bullets began singing as one of the outlaws dismounted and began firing with a rifle.

"Let him go," Mort shouted. "He's a live decoy."

"Damned alive," Lonnie muttered. "Almost winged me. Dust jumped out of my shirt sleeve. A man can get killed in this business and not half try. But who wants to live to be a hundred and have stiff joints?"

For a man almost seventy, Mort had little regard for his brittle bones. He flung himself from his horse and let it go on. He rolled into a thicket and Lonnie hit the same spot a moment later. An outlaw opened fire a hundred feet distant. As Lonnie rushed him, Mort said, "Drop!" Lonnie dropped and a bullet droned through space where his head had been. Mort fired and a man pitched forward,

his face wearing an astonished expression. He turned purple and fell against a boulder.

Lonnie ran up a steep slope, starting a movement of shale. This time there was no Mort to help out. The outlaw's first bullet struck his left shoulder. He went down, got to his knees and fired. The outlaw draped over a boulder, then he began sliding. Gradually his legs came into view, then he slid almost to Lonnie's knees.

"Two of 'em," Lonnie said.

Mort hurried up, limping from a turned ankle. "Let's have a look at the wound." Expertly he cut away the shirt, probed the bleeding flesh and said, "I'll stop the bleedin'. Nothin' serious, but a cussed nuisance." A few minutes later he said, "There you are! Hey, son, where you goin'?"

"The third one's coming this way," Lonnie answerd. "He figures his pardners got us."

He ran a short distance and crouched. He wanted this one alive. As the man came into view, Lonnie fired, neatly drilling the man's hat. He looked wildly around, trying to locate the exact source of the bullet, then unbuckled his holsters, dropped them to the ground and raised his hands.

Lonnie laughed. "That's cooperation, Mister."

ONE LIVE prisoner and two dead men lashed to saddles came down the trail to Sheriff Purdy. "Damned if I see how your horses outlasted mine, Cleland," he said.

"When you've lived as long as I have," Mort answered, "you'll know the answer to a lot of mountain country problems. Here's the loot. Come on, Lonnie, let's hit the long trail home. It's been quite a day."

They were in Kathy's living room, with a square meal under their belts, when Sheriff Purdy came in. He had sent his horses and their trailers back to the flat country. He looked like a man about to eat a lot of crow.

"How about taking over your old job, Cleland?" he said.

"Not interested," Mort answered. "I'm getting along in years. Ain't the man I used to be. But I've trained a good man to take my place—fellow named Lonnie Lee. He's goin' to get married and stay here. I'll take it easy, but I'll also give him a hand when he needs it. Which won't be often."

"What about it, Lonnie?" Purdy asked. "Braddock's pulling out."

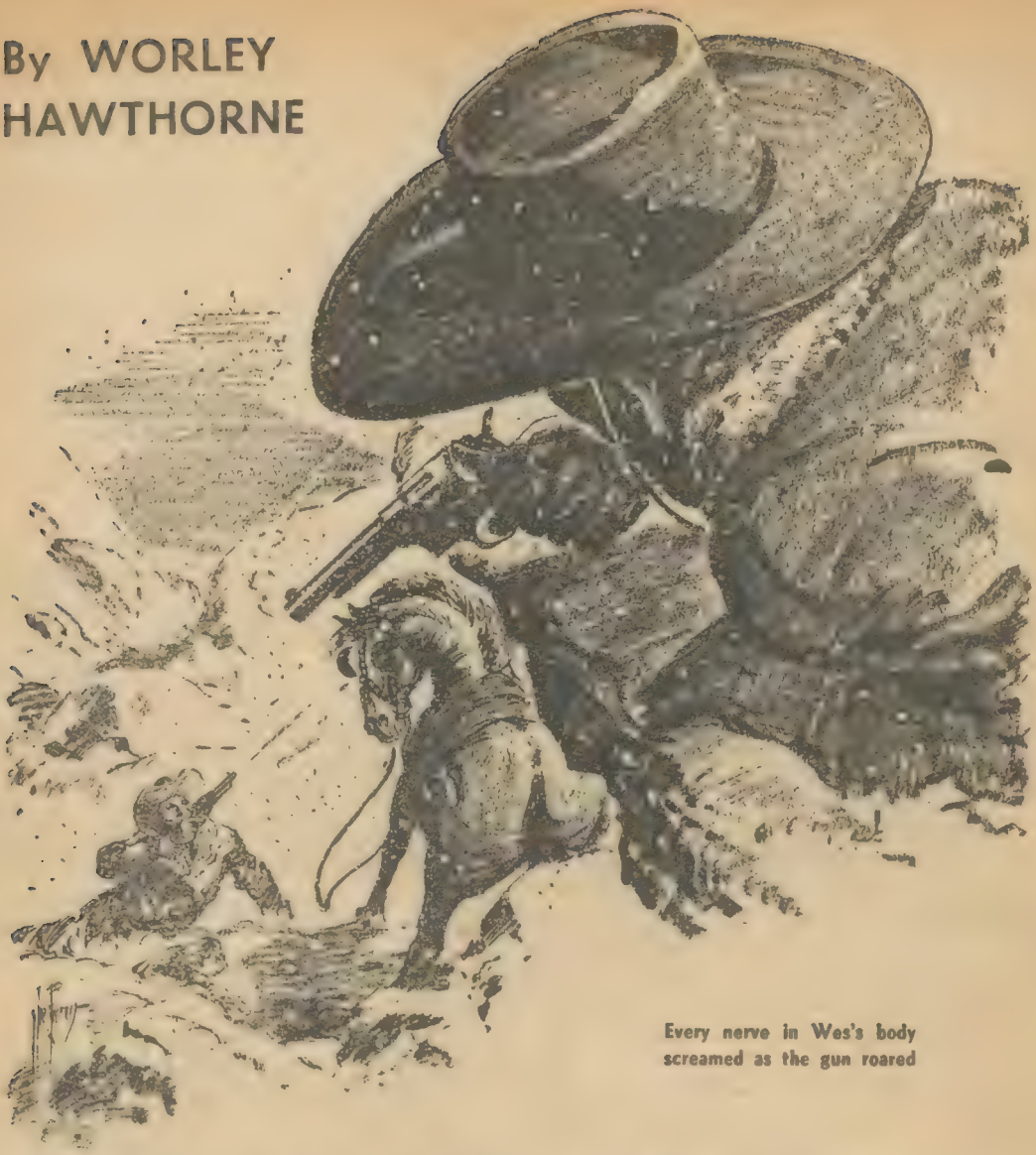
"I'll take it," Lonnie said.

"Another thing," Purdy said. "You can get the Gilmour Forty pretty cheap."

"If Anders will loan me the money, and I think he will," Lonnie answered, "now that I've a steady job."

"You're turnin' out better than I figgered, Purdy," Mort said. "You profit by experience. Maybe you won't have to wait until you're as old as I am to know why your horses played out. They're flat country nags. Horse or man, it makes no difference. If you're from the flat country, you soon get winded in this thin, high country air. That's why sheriffs always hired my horses when outlaws took to the mountains." • • •

By WORLEY HAWTHORNE



Every nerve in Wes's body screamed as the gun roared

# Ride to Perdition

*What was a little hell—especially Wes Bartlett's—to the Heaven-bound psalm-singers of Waterville?*

WES BARTLETT cracked the ribbons against the rumps of his sweating grays and swung in the bucking seat of the swaying stagecoach for a look at the snowstorm which had tailed him all the way down Bear Claw Mountain. The oncoming front of the storm was a great, swishing white curtain. As the gusty wind whipped pebbles of icy snow against his cheeks, he turned back to his grays.

"C'mon, you horsehides!" he shouted.

He knew he had to keep rolling, had to beat that storm through Carson's Cut or he'd be digging out of snow banks. He'd been delayed two hours by drifts back there in the high altitudes and he was trying to make up time.

Aboard were three passengers and a five-thousand-dollar pay roll destined for the TK Ranch near Pawnee City, eight miles to the north. Twenty-odd cowhands —one of which was Mit Camron, a troublemaker—had pounded leather for six months and had come to the end of the season without their money ready. If that pay roll didn't go through, hell would break loose on the TK—and Wes would lose his job.

He jerked down the brim of his black stetson, peering into the flying diagonals of snow. A hundred yards ahead, downgrade, lay Waterville—a grain mill, general store, blacksmith shop, jailhouse, church and a half dozen houses. Wes had been born in Waterville and still came here to court Ann Beaumont, daughter of the local blacksmith-preacher.

Now the stage dropped sharply toward the mill creek which foamed across the road at the edge of the village. Suddenly the stage, racing at a wild clip, hit the rocky bed of the stream. Spray flew up from the hoofs of the grays. He gave them the reins. Then the stage started bumping.

As the wheels hit gravel again he hauled in on the lines. Something was wrong. When he saw the rim of the left front wheel go speeding crazily past the horses, his heart did a somersault. The steel rim hit a stone, jumped high into the air and skidded through the skittering snow into the ditch a few yards below the general store. Before he could stop the stage, a section of the wheel's wooden felly had been shattered.

Bumping to a stop he swung down beside the wheel. "Of all the damn luck!" he cursed.

THE PASSENGERS scrambled out—the fat-jowled, red-beaked drummer with the dissipated eyes; the dancehall girl with a fur coat over a long, full-skirted outfit of pink taffeta; and the Scotsman with the penny-thin lips who was bound for Pawnee City on a horse-buying mission.

The voluble drummer said, "You crazy driver—shakin' us around like dice in a gambler's hand!"

Wes smiled the best he could. He didn't want trouble. He'd had his share in the past year, having been fired from three driving jobs, each time because he had unintentionally neglected his duty. Once he had not picked up an army officer when the stage was overloaded. Another time he had mistakenly stranded a passenger in a town where there were no accommodations. The last time he had forgotten the mail when he'd raced ahead to a doctor in an attempt to save a woman's life.

Those events were what had branded him as a wild, young buck with no sense of responsibility. Even Ann Beaumont had accused him of being wild and negligent. It wasn't so, he told himself. He'd only tried to be human.

"I'm sorry," Wes said, looking at his passengers huddled in the thickening snow, "but we're two hours late. I've got to beat the worst of this storm through Carson's Cut and reach Pawnee City close to schedule. My job depends on it."

"An' so does m' life, mon," the Scotsman shivered.

The girl angrily switched her taffeta skirt. "A lot of dancing I'll be able to do, with all my bones broken."

Wes looked at his watch. "It's ten-thirty. We'll be outa here in less than an hour—soon as I get the wheel repaired."

The drummer said, "We'll have coffee while we wait."

"No eatin' place here," Wes said, adjusting his .45 Colt in its holster. "There's a store there," he added, pointing to the scrawny building which was separated from Beaumont's blacksmith shop by a side road that snaked back into the hills. "Might get cheese and crackers." Then he turned to his work.

A few minutes later when Wes hurried past the store on his way to the shop, he

saw his three passengers on the store porch where they were standing with their backs to the slanting snow.

"This damn town is closed up tighter than a jug," the drummer called.

Suddenly Wes realized that it was Sunday. The he saw a man and woman and two children, hunched against the stinging snow, stop in front of the blacksmith shop. The man called to Ann and the Reverend Beaumont who were coming down the slope from their house up back of the shop.

"Looks like a blizzard, Reverend," the man shouted. Then he went on, seeing that Wes was waiting for the Beaumonts.

Wes rolled the wheel under the shedlike roof in front of the shop and waited for Ann and her father to come down to the shop. They turned the corner and were under the shed before they saw Wes.

"Howdy, Ann! Howdy, Reverend!" Wes said.

"Well, howdy, Wes," Beaumont said. "What brings you to Waterville on a day like this?"

Wes looked at the blasting chaos of snow which had blotted out Bear Claw Mountain and had made the road invisible beyond the mill.

"Got a new job," he glanced at Ann. "Drivin' stage from Denver to Pawnee City. But I'm in a fix. Threw a rim at the creek down there and busted up a felly. How about repairin' it for me, Reverend?"

Beaumont said, "First thing Monday mornin'."

Wes swallowed sharply and looked at the preacher's piercing eyes. Beaumont was a florid-faced, heavy-set man with a sandy mustache and, Wes knew, he had an iron will.

"I've got to get it repaired now, Reverend," Wes urged. "You know how snow drifts in that cut outside of town. I've got to get rollin'."

"It's Sunday," Ann protested. "You know father doesn't work on the Sabbath."

"But my job depends on this wheel," Wes pleaded, looking into Ann's blue eyes. She was a pretty woman, two years younger than Wes, with peach-colored hair and a pert round face. The flush of vibrant health was rich on her pink cheeks and red lips. Remembering the times he had kissed her, Wes involuntarily moistened his own lips.

BEFORE he had been branded as a wild one, he and Ann had talked of marriage. He still loved her, regardless of what she thought of him. Maybe he had been wild, but, he told himself, all young men with any spunk were a little wild. He had learned his lesson, though, and he wanted Ann to know that as well as his boss, but if he failed to get the stage through the cut—

Beaumont saidf, "Why all the desperation, Wes?"

"I've got a five-thousand-dollar pay roll on the stage," Wes explained, "and if I don't get it through, hell's—pardon me, Reverend—goin' to break loose on Tom Kane's ranch. Mortgages took the money from his cattle sale this fall. He didn't have anything left to pay his cowhands. At the last minute he made a deal with a bank in Denver and his men, twenty-odd, promised to wait for their pay till this mornin'. I'm two hours late already. If you'll fix the wheel—"

"Why not take a horse," Beaumont asked, "and ride on with the money? You can come back later for the coach."

Ann nodded approval of her father's suggestion.

"It ain't that easy," Wes explained. "You know my reputation. And my boss, Mike Kennilworth, said if I ever left a passenger stranded he'd fire me. He said he'd see I never got another job drivin'. I've got three passengers huddled over there on the store porch."

"But—" Ann began, gathering the collar of her red coat under her chin.

"There ain't any *buts!*" Wes snapped.

"You'd better stay over till Monday, anyway," Beaumont said. "There was a holdup last night, a mile out at Carson's Cut. You with a pay roll—"

Anger flamed up in Wes and struck fire

to his words. "Are you goin' to repair the wheel, Reverend? I'm losin' time and Carson's Cut is goin' to be drifted. Besides," he added, pointing to his waiting passengers, "I'm responsible to those people."

A mule-drawn wagon, with a man and woman in the front seat and a half dozen children under a blanket in the back, rattled out of the side road by the shop. The man waved at Beaumont, turned his wagon up past the jailhouse and then headed for the church a quarter mile up the road toward Pawnee City.

Beaumont pointed to the white church where buggies and horses were tied to a fence out front. "More than a hundred people are waitin' there—come from miles around to worship. I'm just as responsible to them." Then he turned to Ann. "Come on. We'll be late and I've got a lengthy sermon to preach."

When they started down the road, Wes kicked at some hoof trimmings with the toe of his boot. He watched the snow, like white smoke, whipping about the feet of Ann and her father and a dull pain settled around the region of his heart. He'd been raised in Waterville, had known the Beaumonts longer than he'd known anybody except his parents and he couldn't believe that they'd let him down when he needed them so badly.

He swallowed the emotion lumped in his throat, left the wheel against the shop door and walked across to his passengers on the store porch.

"Well," the sarcastic drummer said, "if here don't come Buffalo Bill!"

WES stopped with one foot on the porch step. "Listen, Mister," he snapped, "I've got trouble enough and I ain't in no mood for ribbing. The blacksmith won't repair the wheel because it's Sunday. He's the preacher here and don't believe in work on the Lord's Day. Looks like we're stuck for a spell—unless I go horseback into Pawnee City for another stagecoach."

"Now wait a minute, sonny," the drummer threatened. "You ain't leavin' us stranded here in this forsaken hole."

"You don't dare leave me here," the girl cut in. "This line said they'd get me to Pawnee City this morning—not this afternoon or tomorrow and if I don't get there, I'm going to raise hell and I'm going to report you for driving so fast."

"M' mon," the Scotsman said, "you ha' no sense o' duty."

"Seems I've heard that before," Wes said, "but what can I do by stayin' here with you? It's eight miles to Pawnee City. If I go for another stagecoach and if I ain't blocked by snowdrifts, I can be back for you by one o'clock."

"But if you're blocked," the drummer shot back, "there ain't no place here to eat. No hotel. No nothin'. This is what I call damn, low-down, dirty service and I'm goin' to spread the story of the Kennilworth Stage Company service from here to Denver and back. No other drummer will ever ride your damn stage—not if I can help it."

Wes knew his passengers were justified in their anger, but he was convinced that they were wrong in insisting that he stay with them. He made his decision. "You can find shelter in the church," he said, "and you'll be comfortable there until I get back from Pawnee City."

Then he started in a dog-trot toward the stagecoach. He didn't like the idea of leaving the pasengers. He knew leaving them would probably mean his job, but if he rode on for another coach, he could kill two birds with one stone—get the pay roll to Tom Kane before Mit Camron and the other cowhands went wild, and get another coach with which to come back to Waterville for his passengers.

When Wes reached the horses he slid the harness off the fastest gray, tossed the gear into the coach and then climbed up for the elkskin bag which contained the TK pay roll. With one foot on the right front wheel of the stage, he sprang onto the gray's bare back and gave her a whack on the rump. She almost shot out from under him as she headed up through Waterville.

Three quarters of a mile beyond the

Waterville church, Wes's horse, with Wes bent forward against the snow, sped along the road through a pine woods and then into Carson's Cut with its overhanging, snow-covered ledges. Drifts had started to form and he knew he'd have to ride like the devil!

Whan-ng! Without warning a bullet stabbed Wes's left shoulder. Whan-ng! Another bullet screamed past his ear. Stunned, Wes hit the snow and scrambled for cover. Again the gun fired. This time the bullet bored a vertical hole in the snow ten inches from the toe of his boot. Wes drew his .45 and scanned the area. A hat disappeared at the edge of a rock thirty feet above.

The hat appeared again. Wes fired. The bullet kicked snow in the man's face. The man lost his hat as he ducked back and Wes caught sight of a mop of wirelike red hair. Fear clawed at Wes's heart. The man was Mit Camron, Tom Kane's troublemaker. Camron was out to get the whole Kane pay roll.

KEEPING close to the side of the cut, Wes ran back to where he could scramble up the slope into the pines. He hunched behind the trunk of a tree. Forty yards ahead of him, his enemy was working along the edge of the cut, looking for him. Remembering that Camron had used three bullets, Wes dashed for the next tree, eight yards away.

Camron—as if he had a sixth sense—spun and fired. Bark flew off the tree beside Wes's face. Wes triggered. Camron dived for cover and the bullet kicked up snow at his heels. Camron had two bullest left in his gun. Wes figured his only chance of beating the outlaw was to keep him from reloading. He knew he would have no chance in a hand to hand fight with Camron, because with every beat of Wes's heart, pain thumped through his shoulder. His left arm was limp and useless.

He sized up the situation. Four trees, their shoulder-wide trunks in a zig-zagging line, stood between Wes and his enemy. Camron was trying to reload, sensing Wes's strategy. Wes fired. Camron's gun answered and the bullet jerked Wes's coat sleeve. Camron tried again to reload. Again Wes cracked down on him. The red-haired outlaw suddenly became a part of the tree, but he leveled on Wes. Wes sensed and waited. The gun didn't fire.

When Wes looked from behind the tree, Camron had reached the next big pine—ten yards away. Wes's heart leaped against his throat. He blasted, but too late. Camron was safe and he still had one cartridge left in his gun.

Now Camron's green eyes peered around the tree. A crooked smile creased the raw, red features of his vulture-like face and the wild cry of his voice came sharply on the snowy wind.

"You'll never live to reach Pawnee City with Kane's pay roll, Bartlett! I'm goin' to kill you!"

A chill, like an icicle, slid down the length of Wes's backbone. Fear clawed at his heart and clogged his throat. If he was killed, it would be hours before Sheriff Jud Prody and his men would find him. By that time, Camron would be safely out of the country with Kane's money. But Wes didn't intend to die. He meant to get through with that pay roll, to reach Pawnee City and then return to Waterville for his passengers. He was determined to do his duty this time.

Camron had one bullet left and Wes figured to make him waste it. Then he would rush the outlaw and get the drop on him, but Camron was all fox. He stepped from behind the tree, faked a run at Wes. Wes aimed but didn't fire, because he, too, had only one bullet in his gun. Camron slid back. Now Wes attempted to reload. Again Camron faked the run, coming farther out this time. Wes leveled. Camron dived for cover.

Wes breeched his .45, but Camron darted from behind the tree, and was halfway to Wes's position before Wes could snap the cylinder into place and draw bead. When Camron saw the gun, he hit the snow and slid head first back to the cover of the pine. Wes hadn't fired. Now Cam-

ron could make but one deduction—that Wes's gun was empty. That's what Camron wanted to know, and that's what Wes wanted him to believe.

Suddenly Camron dashed from behind the tree. Wes positioned his .45 and grinned. Camron was confident now. He came on and his eyes were the eyes of a starved killer. With Camron five steps away—in the trap—Wes triggered. The hammer snapped on cold metal. Wes's guts leaped toward his throat and every nerve in his body screamed with terror.

CAMRON came charging on, a mocking grin on his face. He reached out to smack down Wes's gun. Wes triggered again. The .45 bucked in his hand, roared. Camron staggered and crashed against the tree.

While he lay writhing in the snow, Wes took his pistol, but Wes, shaken with fear, had been a poor marksman. The bullet had missed Camron's heart and had punctured his ribs six inches above the beltline. He was reviving quickly. As Wes thumbed cartridges into the chamber of his .45 Colt, he saw Camron start clawing for his own gun. The outlaw scrambled to his knees, hunting his weapon.

"So you're going to kill me!" Wes barked. "You're lucky I didn't kill you and maybe I oughta yet. Wasn't for you, I'd been nearly to Pawnee City by now."

Camron touched his fingers to the blood coming from his side.

"Get up!" Wes said. "You ain't hurt any worse than me. C'mon, start walkin'. Sheriff Prody in Waterville will be glad to see you. C'mon! I ain't got any time to lose."

Both men were bleeding bad, but Wes dug the moneybag out of the snow which had drifted around it in the middle of the road and after he'd caught his horse, he started Camron marching ahead of him toward Waterville.

A few minutes later, as Wes neared Waterville, he remembered that Sheriff Prody always attended church on Sunday. When Wes and Camron reached the church, Wes slid stiffly down off his horse.

"The sheriff's a religious man, Camron," Wes said. "We're goin' in here to get him. If you make any fuss, I'll bore you."

"I ain't goin' in no damn church," the outlaw growled.

Wes prodded him. "Move along now. I ain't got no time for palaver."

Camron cursed, but obeyed. With Wes's .45 against his spine, there was nothing else he could lo. They went up the steps and into the church. Wes noiselessly closed the door behind them.

From the pulpit, Reverend Beaumont's big voice rang clearly over the hushed congregation. Wes wanted to avoid any disturbance, but he had no time to lose. Beaumont, nearing the end of his sermon, was saying, "A certain man who went from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves—" Then he stopped. His eyes popped with surprise as he saw Wes and the outlaw.

Ann turned around on the organ stool to look. Wes saw the humiliation which his presence brought to her eyes and he tried to smile. She slowly shook her head, condemning his behavior. Children, mouths agape, stood on their knees in the benches to stare; old ladies choked back half-uttered screams; and the men counseled each other in preparation for action.

Wes knew that both he and Camron were bloody and dirty. Wes's left sleeve was soaked with blood and his arm hung as limp as a rag at his side. He wanted to do something to dispel the fear in the eyes of the people. He couldn't think of anything that wouldn't create a scene. Having been raised by religious parents, he had a deep respect for all churches, but with his future at stake, he knew this was no time to be meek.

"There's the sheriff," Wes said, prodding Camron. "Sixth row down."

The outlaw, his boot heels pounding like fence posts, walked down the aisle. Wes followed.

He stopped Camron beside the sheriff's seat. "Jud," Wes said quietly, "take this man over. He tried to hold me up. I've got to get goin' for Pawnee City 'fore the

cut's snowed in."

The sheriff clinched his teeth. "Set down, you fool!"

"But, Jud—" Wes protested.

The sheriff jerked Wes down into the seat. "What do you mean, comin' in here like this—disturbin' us all in the middle of the Lord's service!"

"It's your duty, Jud," Wes said, but pulled Camron down beside him.

"Shut up!" the sheriff said. "Listen to the sermon." Then he nodded to Beaumont.

WES looked around and saw his passengers—the drummer, the Scotsman and the girl—staring at him from the rear bench near the church entrance. For a moment he thought of what Mike Kennilworth, his boss, was going to do when he heard of this. When Kennilworth added all the incidents together—the busted wheel, the stranded passengers, the disturbance in church—Wes knew that his jig would be up as stagecoach driver. He had thought that this trip would bring him a change of luck, that he could prove himself and that maybe Ann—

"This man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho," Beaumont continued, leaning on the pulpit, "fell among thieves, was stripped and wounded and left for dead. . . ."

Wes snapped to attention. Something in Beaumont's words rang a bell. He listened.

". . . A priest passed by," Beaumont was saying, "but refused to help the wounded man. A Levite also passed him by. . . ."

Reverend Beaumont became more fervent as he drove toward the climax of his sermon. ". . . But a certain Samaritan stopped to help the man who had fallen among the thieves. And although the Samaritan did not know the wounded man, he bound his wounds anyway, and took care of him." Now Beaumont pointed a horny finger at the members of his congregation. "Which of these three men," he asked beseechingly, "was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves?"

As the preacher paused to give the question time to take effect, the corner of Wes's mouth curled with cold irony. Beaumont could paint pretty pictures of neighborliness and expand on the theory of the Golden Rule, but he wouldn't do a damn thing about a real life situation. Religion was a great thing, Wes knew. He believed in it, but he believed in practical religion. Here was a real life parallel right under Beaumont's nose, but he had refused to be a good Samaritan, the thing he was preaching.

Anger fired up in Wes. He itched to give Beaumont a piece of his mind and he guessed that that was just what he would do. He was beaten anyway. He had nothing to lose. Maybe he'd be called an atheist, but he didn't care. Suddenly he stood up.

"Reverend Beaumont," Wes said, "I can answer your question."

Sheriff Prody growled, "Here, man, sit down!" He jerked at Wes's sleeve, but Wes pushed his hand away and glared at the Reverend.

"Reverend," Wes continued, "I'm sort of like that man who was on his way to Jericho. I've fallen among thieves, was wounded and almost robbed. But worse, I busted up a wheel to my stagecoach. I brought it to your shop hopin' to get it repaired, but like the priest in the Bible, you passed me by when you knew I needed help.

"This is real life, Reverend—not something that happened eighteen hundred and seventy-five years ago. This happened today, within an hour, to me. I don't know what problem that wounded fellow had who was on his way to Jericho. I guess it was serious, Reverend, but I'm on my way to Pawnee City and I've got a lot at stake, too—my future.

"You know the name I've got in the past year. I thought this trip would help straighten things out for me, but looks like I'm just ridin' to perdition. I ain't askin' for sympathy. I don't want it, but since you're preachin' neighborliness, seems you could practice it, too. Now, Reverend, I ask you—who is *my* neighbor here in Waterville?"

BEAUMONT leaned with his elbows on the pulpit. He knotted his fists under his chin and his eyes burned with hell fire and brimstone.

"Get out of here!" Sheriff Prody said. "I've got a place for birds like you—in jail."

Wes knew there was no use to protest and resigned himself to defeat. "All right, Jud," he said.

He started up the aisle, pushing Camron ahead of him.

Mike Kennilworth, Wes thought, would never know how he'd tried to do his job and even if he did, Kennilworth wasn't interested in attempts. He didn't pay good wages for that. He wanted to see his stages come through, with cargo in good shape and with passengers happy that they had patronized his stage line and doing so again in future.

At the jailhouse, Prody took the moneybag for safe keeping. Then he shoved the outlaw into one cell and Wes Bartlett into another.

When Prody closed the cell door, Wes began to walk up and down like a caged lion. He cursed himself for having a big mouth, for popping off at Beaumont. Wes knew he was right, but he guessed he'd gone about it the wrong way. Maybe if he hadn't lost his temper—

He stopped. Listened. The clean, clear ringing of a blacksmith's anvil sounded through the wintry air. Wes put a finger in his ear, tried to shake out the ringing, but he couldn't. The sound continued and he wondered if he were hearing things. He had thought so hard about getting the wheel repaired, maybe his imagination was playing tricks on him.

He started to prowl up and down the twelve-foot length of the cell again. Then he heard the thud of boots in the jailhouse office. The sheriff swung open the office door and came to the cell. He stood there a moment, hesitating.

"Wes," Prody said, "Miss Ann's in my office to see you."

Wes swallowed sharply as Prody unlocked the cell door. Then he followed the sheriff into the office.

"Oh, Wes!" Ann cried, meeting Wes in front of the sheriff's desk. "Father didn't mean for anything like this to happen."

"I had it comin', Ann," Wes said, "breakin' up his sermon like that. It wasn't right."

"Father admires you. He said you were right. He told the congregation so and he said be-hanged to Sunday when a man needs help. He's fixing the wheel for you, Wes. It'll be ready in a few minutes and—"

"It's too late, Ann," he said. "The cut will be blocked with drifts—"

Ann broke in. "Your speech had its effect, Wes. Church members going that way said they'd keep the cut open. That's your just reward for showing them what was right."

Wes turned toward the sheriff. Prody said, "What's good enough for Reverend Beaumont is plenty good for me. You're free, Wes. There's your moneybag on the desk. Now get goin' so I can take care of this renegade cowhand."

Wes grabbed up the bag, but Ann stopped him. "It'll be a few minutes before the wheel is ready. Let me take care of that shoulder meanwhile."

He looked into Ann's blue eyes and he saw more there than a good Samaritan's neighborly love.

He saw an unmistakable promise for the future.

Twenty minutes later when Wes climbed up into the seat of the stagecoach —with the TK pay roll and three reconciled passengers aboard—he was a happy man.

Beaumont reached up to shake Wes's hand. He said, "Accept my apologies, Wes. You've got fine stuff in you." Then he smiled. "And you know, you helped me preach the sermon of my life today."

Wes grinned, lifted the ribbons and cracked them against the rumps of his grays. "C'mon, you horsehides!" he shouted. The stagecoach shot forward, started rolling up through Waterville toward Pawnee City and Wes's heart began singing happily in time with the flying wheels. ●●●

# Stranger on the Prod

*They were waiting for Jamison there, the whole kit and kaboodle of 'em. If he wanted war, they were just the waddies to serve it up—red hot!*

a novel by LEE FLOREN

## CHAPTER I

### *Burn-Out*

WHEN the man carrying a rifle ran out of the underbrush, Claghorn Jamison almost rode him down. Only by a sudden pull on the reins did he swerve his horse in time.

"What the hell?" he snapped.

The rifleman came to a halt, boot heels digging into the damp earth. He started to raise his Winchester, but as he stared upward at Jamison's .45 he quickly pointed the rifle-barrel down at the Montana sod.

His deep voice growled, "Who the hell are you, stranger?"

"I could ask you the same," Jamison said shortly. "You running from trouble?"

The man was short, wide, tough-looking. An old jumper covered heavy shoulders and his levis were old and torn. He wore his pants legs outside his boots cowpuncher style. And his whiskery face was so ugly it fascinated Jamison. The wide nose evidently had once been broken, and had been set wrong. The nostrils flared in and out as the man breathed.

"I asked you a question," he said to Jamison, in that deep, reasonant voice. "Who the hell are you?"

Swift thoughts were speeding through Jamison's mind. When he had ridden into this clearing he had heard three shots somewhere ahead, muted by the endless Montana wind. He had thought a hunter

Blinded, boot heels digging in hard, Jamison dragged the man from the fire

was after his fall deer. Now as he looked across the brush and saw gray smoke lazily rising from the timber about a quarter-mile ahead, he knew different.

He brought his gaze back to the rifleman. "I am the Reverend Claghorn Jamison, sir," he said. He saw no reason he should tell this man he was a bank inspector. "A roving man of the Gospel riding into Beavertail town."

"Sky pilot, eh?" Those nostrils moved in and out, the man's eyes narrowed in ponderous thought.

Jamison waited patiently, gun out, conscious of the earthy smells of willows and timber after the rain. He said, "There is a fire up ahead, sir."

The rifleman did not turn to look. He kept peering at Jamison. "Yeah," he said, "a fire."

Jamison's brows lifted. "Is there trouble on this grass?"

"Yeah, trouble, Parson."

Jamison shrugged. "I want no trouble with any man." He dropped his .45 into the black, oiled holster. "I carry my pistol to shoot game with, sir."

A grin touched the ugly face. "For a sky pilot you can sure draw it fast."

Jamison smiled thinly. "I never saw you before. If I ever see you again I won't recall you."

SMALL eyes weighed him, judged him. The fellow wet his thick lips. "Reverend, I like your cut. But a little advice? Maybe you don't know Beavertail has already got a sky pilot. There's a gold rush going on across the Canadian line—the scum of the earth. You could do a lot more good there than in Beavertail."

Jamison, bubbling over inside with laughter, kept his voice calm, his face straight. "But I understand there's a gold rush at Beavertail, too. A mad, sinful town, I've heard. However, if there's already a minister in the town, I'll think it over, sir."

The man became patronizing. "You're a good man, Parson. Just keep your memory short and your eyesight bad. So long."

The man trotted into the high brush, and in a moment Clag Jamison heard a horse leave fast, the hoofs sounds rapidly diminishing.

Jamison grinned. He thought, *You*, a sky pilot! But how could I tell him I'm here because Charlie Crouse came here to inspect the Beavertail Bank—and hasn't been heard from for three months or so?

His grin faded, was replaced by a grimly thoughtful look. Three shots. A fire ahead—maybe somebody's home. And that ugly man with the killer brand stamped on his hard face.

To the north of the rimrock ledge down which Jamison had ridden ran the sloping hills, into Canada. To the west towered the pine- and spruce-covered Little Rocky Mountains. Beavertail was located on the toe of those mountains, on Beaver Creek. Jamison turned his horse's head toward the town.

But as he saw the smoke from the fire ahead lifting higher, for the first time he was jarred into the realization that perhaps help was needed. He touched spurs to his horse, lifting him into a fast lope. When he burst through the brush into a clearing, a cabin there was already half burned down—and a man lay on his back in the doorway, his head out the door!

Jamison leaped to the ground, hurriedly uncinched his kak, and pulled the heavy damp Navajo blanket from the horse's broad back. Shielded by it, he ran toward the doorway, all but driven back by the pound of the heat. He grabbed the man's arms and, blinded, boot heels digging in, he backed away, dragging the man.

Beyond the perimeter of heat, Jamison threw off the blanket, knelt beside the body, panting. There were three bullet-holes in the man's chest, and he had been badly burned about the neck and face.

The fire was increasing, the cabin crackling as it burned with savage, primitive sounds. Conquering his nausea, Jamison looked around.

Evidently this dead man had been a farmer. An oat field was in the clearing —oats about a foot high, already forming

sturdy heads.

Suddenly Jamison remembered that ugly face, those flaring, wide nostrils. His jaw hardened with an instinctive realization. This had been murder! And that same instinct pointed at the killer.

A small log barn was about a hundred feet from the house. Flames were leaping from its roof of brushes and branches. But Jamison could see there were no horses or cattle inside.

He was resaddling his horse when a voice from behind him ordered tightly:

"Turn around, you damned killer!"

Jamison stood stock-still, thin face frozen. Evidently it was a boy behind him, for the voice trembled with immaturity.

"Turn around, you Bar Nine killer!" The voice was harsher now, and Jamison knew that when he turned he would look into a pistol, a rifle or a shotgun in the hands of a furiously angry young man.

Hands level with his shoulders, he turned. But there was no young man behind him, nor was there a rifle, nor a shotgun nor a pistol pointed at him.

The girl standing there was carrying a fishing-pole, a diamond-willow pole with a fishhook jammed into the cork bobber. In her other hand she held a string of fish, a forked willow through their gills.

JAMISON judged her to be in her early twenties. Her face was pretty, though somewhat peaked and pale; the marks of poverty plain. She was barelegged, but wore men's heavy work shoes, and a worn old calico dress. The shabby, threadbare old overcoat over the dress was fastened by a thin wire running from a button to a button-hole.

And as plainly a baby was on the way.

Her face was savage now, too. Her black hair glistened, as did her dark eyes. Or was that grief?

"Who are you?" Jamison asked.

"You damned Bar Nine gunhand, you know who I am!"

Of course she believed he had killed this man, had set this fire. But how did the Bar Nine—probably a local cow outfit—fit in?

He said, "Ma'am, I'm Claghorn Jamison, a stranger in this country, riding for Beavertail. I saw this fire and rode this way. I pulled—your husband, was he?—from the flames, but he was already gone. Believe me, I've never even heard of any Bar Nine."

Her eyes swept his face, went to his horse. She murmured, "Your horse doesn't pack the Bar Nine iron. I was fishing—for our dinner. I heard the shots, I saw the fire. I'd just hid in the brush when I saw you drag him out. I knew he was dead—Bar Nine killers shoot to kill!" She choked, looking at her dead husband, "Let's cover him with my coat."

She was ready to break. Jamison knew she was holding herself in only with a will of steel.

"Keep your coat on, ma'am," he said gently. "I've got a slicker tied across my saddle."

Jamison untied the yellow oilskin slicker and covered the dead man.

"Why would the Bar Nine—wherever it is— kill your husband and burn your home, ma'am?"

"We're farmers."

Jamison nodded, thinking, An old, old story.

She said, too calmly, "Jim was a good man. He's the father—"

Then, without warning, she wept.

Jamison stood with one arm around her, as she gave full vent to her grief, weeping broken-heartedly. He glanced at the sky; blue, with storm clouds gone. He looked at the earth; splendid earth that supplied man with food, with warmth, with shelter. Something he had once read flashed across his mind:

"Man marks the earth with ruin."

He waited patiently, then said, as she quieted, "We'd better get to town to notify the sheriff. . . ."

In Beavertail, after the woman was first given attention, Jamison returned to the sheriff's office and found Sheriff Henry Fulton sitting on a wooden bench in front of the log office. About fifty, heavy; thick of chest and jowl, and with an enormous pendulant belly. He also had a squeaky

voice that did not fit his gross body.

That voice squeaked to Jamison, "Doc put the woman to bed. Fed her some tablets that put her to sleep. Now tell me again what you know. Jamison, you say your name is?"

Jamison nodded and leaned back against the logs. "Darned little, Sheriff."

The enormous bulk shifted on the bench. "Sent out a deputy. He'll report back soon."

Jamison glanced across the street. He had already noted two men who stood in the window, watching him. The bright blue sign over the door said: THE SILVER DOLLAR.

The younger man was about Jamison's own height and age—an inch over six feet, and twenty-eight. Not as stocky as Jamison, though. He'd tip the scales at about one-seventy-five to Jamison's one ninety-five.

But the other man! He had a flat, ugly nose, with nostrils that flared in and out, and he never took his little pig eyes off Jamison. He wore an old jumper and worn levis, but his companion was gaudy in a red silk shirt and California pants. The face of that companion was not unhandsome, but its rugged lines indicated no love for humanity, no consideration for others.

"Well," Sheriff Fulton said, a little impatiently, "you'd better tell me your story again."

Jamison repeated it without, however, telling of his meeting with the man with the crooked nose. He saw the door of the Silver Dollar open, and that man scuffed across the street to them.

Jamison thought, sure, he wants to hear what I say to the sheriff.

## CHAPTER II

### *Tough Hands*

PIGLIKE eyes appraised Jamison and the sheriff as the man with the crooked nose put his back against the logs, and sighed with bovine heaviness.

Fulton said, "Howdy, Joe."

"Howdy, Sheriff." Joe looked suggestively at Jamison and the sheriff said, "This here is Clag Jamison. He pulled that farmer's body out of the fire."

Joe nodded.

The other man still stood in the window of the Silver Dollar, apparently only enjoying the sunshine, but Jamison thought, he's sent his eyes and ears across the street to watch me, to hear me.

"You see anybody around the fire?" Sheriff Fulton asked him.

Now something glistened in Joe's eyes. For a moment they were metallic, bright and ugly.

"Only the man's wife," Jamison said.

Joe's eyes became dead again.

The sheriff said, "That fire might've been accidental. That farmer had been ailing, and he might've shot himself because he was."

Jamison asked, without warning, "Who is that across the street in the window of the Silver Dollar?"

Fulton swiveled his beefy head around. "Why, Jamison?"

"He watches me like he knows me," Jamison said. "But I sure don't know *him.*"

"Oh, that's Al Seligman," Fulton explained. "Bar Nine."

Jamison nodded. "He own the spread?"

Fulton said, "He's the ramrod. Lee Deming owns the spread." He sighed and Jamison saw pain on his face. "Something hurts me in my belly all the time." His eyes closed, his lips tightened against pain. Then he lifted his shaggy head. "Doc Welters don't know what it is, either."

A woman came out of the Mercantile, the store next to the Silver Dollar, came across the street toward them. The way she walked, straight and proud, made him think of Louise. But Louise was gone. These five years. Why did a man have to remember?

This woman's hair was dark and glistening, combed tightly to her head. She had a thin face with high cheek-bones, a

straight, firm nose, and quiet dark eyes.

Those eyes met his and held for a moment. And in that moment, Jamison had new hope.

"Hello, Sheriff Fulton," she said. Her voice fitted her. Warm, rich.

"Hello, Miss Marie."

She did not speak to Joe, nor to Jamison, either. But she did not know Jamison. Then suddenly, as Jamison glanced at Joe, he saw the man's eyes following Marie, and desire was plain in them.

"You should hide it," Jamison said to him quietly.

Joe swung his eyes on him, savage now. "Shut your damned mouth!" he stormed. "You talk too damned much, stranger!"

Jamison smiled. "Maybe I don't talk enough."

Fulton looked up, and his own steerlike eyes held puzzlement. He did not understand this by-play. But Joe did.

Jamison asked, when the girl was out of earshot, "Marie what?"

"Watson is her last name. Why?" Fulton was still puzzled.

"A man always wants to know the full name of a woman that beautiful, Sheriff." Jamison straightened and started to turn away. "Well, I reckon I have nothing more to tell you, Sheriff. I didn't see anybody at the cabin except the wife."

Fulton said, "You'll be around for awhile?"

Joe swung his eyes again to Jamison.

Jamison said, "For some days, Sheriff."

"What's your job?"

Jamison grinned tantalizingly at Joe as he said, "Just a drifter. Sometimes I gamble. I hate work and make no bones about it."

Joe blinked. He had opened his mouth to blurt something out when he realized he could ask no questions. His mouth closed slowly, as though he were afraid he'd chip a tooth.

HE SAID, his voice hoarse, "The Bar Nine owns this town, Jamison."

Jamison nodded. "Sheriff Fulton, too?"

"I didn't say that!"

"You said your outfit owns this town," Jamison said. "That means you own the man who keeps the law, doesn't it?"

Fulton's face was quivering jelly. And white. That told Jamison that the sheriff *was* on the Bar Nine pay-roll.

He stormed, "That's a damned lie, Jamison!"

Jamison's eyes and his voice could be hard when he so desired. "I don't give a damn who you work for," he said firmly.

Fulton said nothing. Joe's smile was small and secretive. And dissension existed between the three like a tangible thing, with each aware of it.

"You stay around town for the coroner's inquest," Sheriff Fulton warned Jamison.

"I'll do that," Jamison assured.

He left then, going to the Town House, where he registered and got a room. Somewhere in this hotel, he was thinking, a widow was sleeping with her unborn child that would never see its father. Jamison thought, None of my business. He did not even know the girl's—no, the woman's—name. He kept thinking of Louise. She was gone, and the soil held her while the wind talked on the rimrock. But because he thought of her, he thought of Marie Watson. Had two woman ever been created alike?

He went to the window of his room, looking down into Main Street where men and women were moving. He caught a flash of steel from across the street—from between the Mercantile and the Silver Dollar. His window shattered as a bullet crashed into it!

But he had seen the reflection—just in time. He had seen a rifle, too, but not who was behind it. As the bullet smashed into a picture and more glass fell, Jamison was already moving. He ran across the hall, ripped open a door, and across a room, heading for a window.

A fat woman in a metal bathtub screamed, and the Negro maid attending her yelled:

"You get outa here, white man!"

Jamison said, "I'm sorry!" as he smashed the window with his six-shooter. The maid was coming for him savagely, with a long-handled bath brush. He went

out the window, leaping to the roof of the next building. The bath brush followed him to the roof.

He scrambled across the shaky roof, climbed a parapet and onto another roof. He went across a third before he dropped to the ground in the alley. Now to circle around and intercept the killer!

Why the attempt to ambush him? Was it because somebody knew he was a bank examiner, or because he had met Joe near the cabin of the murdered homesteader?

He landed on the ground, crouched, taking the shock on his knees, then lurched ahead, running hard. He had circled the end of the street to the entrance to the other alley when he ran into a woman—another woman!

Just as she stepped out the back door of the Silver Dollar he smashed into her, knocking her down. Her rifle flew out of her grip. She sat down hard.

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

Jamison heard hooves pound in the street. A bronc was leaving Beavertail—fast. He looked back at the woman.

"He's getting away," he said.

She tried to get to her feet, and almost fell. Jamison held her by the elbows. She was about as tall as Marie Watson, but there all similarity ended. Marie had olive-tinted skin; this woman was fair. Her hat, hanging down her back by the chin strap, uncovered flaxen hair. Her buckskin riding skirt and a white silk blouse accented pleasing contours.

"Who's getting away?" she demanded.

Jamison said, "The gent who tried to bushwhack me—in my hotel room."

A THOUGHT flashed that perhaps the hoof-sounds had not been made by the ambusher fleeing. They could have been made by a cowpuncher just leaving town at a hard lope. This woman had held a rifle. Woman could ambush, too.

She studied him, lips compressed. "I thought you had broken my ankle. Who are you and what are you talking about?"

"And what do you mean by knocking a lady off her feet?" a man's harsh voice demanded.

Jamison turned, looked into the eyes of the man who had stood in the window of the Silver Dollar beside Joe. The man Sheriff Fulton said was the Bar Nine foreman, Al Seligman.

"What's it to you?" Jamison asked angrily.

He saw the pale eyes narrow, saw blood drain from the man's cheeks. "The lady is Lee Deming, owner of the Bar Nine. And I'm the Bar Nine ramrod—Al Seligman. She pays my wages. I fight her battles."

Jamison knew a moment of surprise. When Sheriff Fulton had said the Bar Nine was owned by Lee Deming, he had believed Lee to be a man's name. His smile further angered Al Seligman.

"Apologize to her, stranger!"

Lee Deming said, "Al, not so rough. It was an accident."

Seligman answered, but he was looking at Jamison, "This is the gent who brought the Widow Jensen into town, Lee. He found her out at the fire today."

Lee Deming said to Jamison, "Take your hands off me!"

He dropped his hands, moved back. He watched Seligman, and Seligman watched him. He had an idea that the foreman was deliberately using this incident to pick trouble. For Jamison knew that Joe had killed the homesteader named Jensen!

Seligman was a Bar Nine man, and Joe worked for Seligman—and the Bar Nine.

Jamison asked Lee Deming, "Was it you who tried to kill me?"

"Why would I try to kill you?" she asked furiously.

Jamison looked at her, then at Seligman. "Forget it," he said, and turned to go. But a hard hand, grabbing his shirt sleeve, stopped him. He looked into the ramrod's angry eyes. And as he caught a glimpse of Lee Deming's eyes, he thought surprise was in their blue depths.

"Al, what's wrong with you?" she asked hurriedly. A crowd was beginning to gather.

But Seligman had no eyes for her. His hard face was twisted as he glared at Jamison.

"You didn't apologize."

"Take that for your damned nosy ways!" she snapped

Inside Jamison was rising anger. This cowman was so plainly forcing a fight. Seligman's hand twisted on the shirt sleeve. Jamison heard the cloth give way. His mother had sent him that shirt from Texas last Christmas. Now this hard-faced son was tearing his mother's last present.

Jamison hacked down with his free hand, smashing against Seligman's forearm with solid force. The shirt tore, but Seligman's hand was knocked loose as he was thrown slightly off-balance. By the time he regained his equilibrium, Jamison had his big .45 in his hand. But his eyes, strangely, were not on the foreman. They were on Joe who stood behind Seligman. Joe had reached, but again Jamison had out-pulled him.

Jamison said stiffly, "Easy with that gun, Joe."

Joe moved back, fear in his small eyes. The flat nose flared out in harsh breathing. Joe's hand moved from his gun.

Jamison said, "Good boy, Joe," and looked back at Al Seligman. Lee Deming had her ramrod by the arm, holding him so that he could not make a move toward his own gun. Maybe, Jamison thought, Seligman was glad of that. Jamison's speed must have surprised the Bar Nine man.

"You don't cotton to me, eh?" Jamison derided him.

"I don't," Seligman said surlily.

Jamison smiled a little. "I came riding along near a place where a cabin was burning down. Inside it was a dead man —a man who had been shot three times. I pulled that bullet-ridden corpse out of that fire."

Seligman's eyes flamed at him. "Where do them things tie in with us here?"

"You're the ramrod of the Bar Nine," Jamison said suggestively, his meaning very clear.

LEE DEMING broke in, clipping her words, "I own the Bar Nine, mister! My iron does not fight the farmers. My orders to my crew are to leave the sod-busters alone. I don't need Jensen's grass. So your hints are worthless, Mr. Jamison —or whatever your name is."

Jamison believed she was sincere. This threw a new light on the whole deal. Maybe he was wrong? But he didn't think so —not about Joe.

He tried a new tactic. "Somebody tried to bushwhack me just a few minutes ago. Shot at me through my hotel room window. The shot came from this alley. I see you're carrying a rifle, Miss Deming."

The words had their effect. Lee Deming's sun-tanned face blazed with anger. Al Seligman moved forward, and Jamison's .45 made a small circle.

Seligman's face drained of blood. "Women on this range don't shoot from ambush, Jamison. Miss Deming had her rifle repaired at the gun-shop and was heading for her horse when you ran into her!"

Jamison bowed, the gesture ironic. He was thinking of Charlie Crouse—Charlie, who had come into this boom town to inspect the bank, and nothing more had been heard of him since. Not a word, not a line, nothing. Counterfeit money was moving out of this country, and Charlie had come to trace the source of it. Such were Jamison's thoughts as he watched Lee Deming steadily. She was beautiful all right, and yet there was a sort of metallic hardness about her.

He said, "I apologize, Miss Deming." He shot a glance at Al Seligman. "Happy?"

"Beavertail range don't need no drifters," Seligman said.

Jamison's free hand gestured toward the crowd. "You've got them all around you. Miners are drifters. They mine copper in Butte, they come from Leadville and Alaska. Drifters."

"I mean saddlebums." There was insult in Seligman's voice, challenge.

Still, Jamison knew a fist fight would settle nothing. The realization drove anger from him.

He holstered his gun and strode away. He needed to know a few more things before he could settle this fight.

## CHAPTER III

*Draw or Die!*

JAMISON strode across the street, thinking, I learned nothing. A bronc had left town fast. Maybe the ambusher had been on that bronc; maybe he hadn't. Anyway, Joe had not been on that horse. He had been with Seligman. Lee Deming had toted a Winchester. A rifle bullet from the alley had broken that window, had just missed him. What if Lee Deming *had* shot that bullet?

"Trouble, eh, stranger?" said an unfamiliar voice beside him.

The man standing there was about fifty, and he wore a neat brown suit. He had a wide face, keen gray eyes, and iron-gray hair under a flat-brimmed hat.

"All the time," Jamison agreed, smiling.

The man mouthed his cigar, mumbling, "Isaiah Hampsen is the name. Owner of the Lucky Cougar Mine up on the mountain. The biggest."

"Jamison is the name. Clag Jamison."

"I've been hearing you're a minister of the Gospel, Jamison."

"An old joke of mine."

Jamison moved on, leaving Hampsen making slow circles with the cigar between his lips. Heading for the bank, Jamison idly wondered why this Isaiah Hampsen who seemed to be an important man, had spoken to him. The man exuded power. Back of those shrewd eyes was a smart brain.

Then Jamison remembered. He had jokingly told only one man he was a sky pilot. So Joe must have been talking to this Hampsen. But, after all, that meant nothing. Joe could have told anybody of a chance meeting outside of town with Jamison who had claimed to be a minster.

Sheriff Fulton, sitting outside his office, called to Jamison:

"The deputy got back. All he found out was that there'd been a fire." The lawman squinted at him, then said in his squeaky voice, "Heard somebody shot at you through the hotel window."

"Missed me," said Jamison, smiling.

But Sheriff Fulton was glum. "Who would want to shoot at you, a stranger, and why?"

"You got me there."

Fulton frowned, eyes narrowing. "Jamison," he said, "I been thinking. There must be some reason for you riding into this mining town."

"My horse brought me," Jamison replied.

Fulton leaned back, hands around his belly, eyes closed as for a moment pain shook him, then his eyes opened.

"I couldn't even climb the stairs to your room to look around," he complained, but as he spoke his eyes were on Al Seligman, again standing in the window of the Silver Dollar. "I been having this bad pain ever since Mrs. Fulton died, three years ago. Seems it couldn't be worse if somebody drove a bullet through me."

Jamison glanced across at the Bar Nine ramrod, too.

"If Seligman rubs me again," he said, "I'll use my gun." He turned away and headed for the Beavertail Bank.

He wished now that he had ridden into this town under an assumed name. It was not impossible that Charlie Crouse had inadvertently mentioned the name of Claghorn Jamison. Sometimes drink loosened Charlie's tongue. But where was he now?

Jamison and Charlie had been raised together in Texas, had come north with longhorns and, losing interest in punching cows for thirty bucks a month, had learned the banking business. Their old boss, a powerful southern Montana cowman, had got them on with the territorial bank examiner's office, working out of Helena.

Jamison had worked the southern half of the territory; Charlie the northern section.

Entering the bank, with its familiar smell of ink and ledgers, Jamison stopped at the counter. A woman looked up at him.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

Jamison stared, but quickly caught himself. "I want to change a hundred-dollar bill, please."

She took the bill and looked at it. Jamison looked at her. Her dark eyes lifted to his.

"What do you want in change, sir?"

"Ten ten-buck bills is all right, Miss Watson."

Marie Watson looked surprised. "How did you know my name?"

Jamison smiled. "I asked," he said.

AS SHE turned and went to the safe, her back toward him, walking free and independent and straight, the door opened and Isaiah Hampsen entered. The mine owner nodded at Jamison, said to Marie, "Like to talk to you later, Miss Banker." Then he grinned as he said to Jamison, "Miss Watson runs this bank. Only woman banker in Montana I reckon, isn't she?"

"I don't know," Jamison said. "I don't know many bankers in Montana Territory."

Hampsen just rolled his cigar and turned his attention to some papers he placed on the counter as Marie Watson came back with Jamison's change. . . .

The man who seemed to be known only as Joe had come to kill Clag Jamison. Jamison had seen too much, knew too much. Joe came quietly down the hotel hallway and sidled toward Jamison's room. He didn't know that Jamison was in the room across the hall. With the window broken in the room to which Jamison had originally been assigned, he had, unknown to the clerk, moved across the hall.

Jamison knew he was in danger. Somehow word of his mission had traveled ahead of him, and there were men in this town and on this range who were out to kill him. Joe was one of them.

The money Marie Watson had given him in ten-dollar notes had all been good sound U.S. currency. But he knew that counterfeit money had been going through her bank. That had been established. Counterfeit could be disposed of easily here, too. It could be distributed to the miners on pay-day.

But where was it coming from? Not, apparently, from the East. Government men had checked all possible angles. But somewhere it was being printed, and the printing was cleverly done. Good engraving.

But with the reason for his presence here known, there was real danger for Clag Jamison. It would not be long before he heard from somebody. Someone would come for him—soon. So, before Joe appeared, he had been standing there, his door open a little, waiting.

And his thoughts ran on. He had learned much in a few hours. For one thing, Marie Watson had inherited the bank from her father, three years ago. She had been on the stage, and when she had come here to take over her father's business, this town was just becoming a boom town. Everybody had figured she would sell, and go back to acting. Instead, she had stayed here to run the bank. But Jamison knew now why she walked so straight. The stage.

Jamison, eye to the crack, saw Joe stop in front of the door across the hall. Joe had his gun in one hand. With the other, he was turning the knob. In his eyes was a queer, maniacal look as he found it locked.

He turned the knob and put his weight against it, but the door held. After a quick look up and down the hall, he fished in his shirt pocket for a skeleton key, and opened the door.

As Joe slipped inside, leaving the door open a little, Jamison smiled a crooked smile. All Joe would find in that room would be an empty warbag he carried tied behind his saddle. The contents were in this other room.

Jamison moved silently across the hall. Odd that in this moment of danger he should be thinking of Marie Watson, and how she had reminded him of Louise. He had known a pang of hunger when he had first seen her. But after he had talked with her in the bank, it had gone away.

She had not seemed genuine.

Lee Deming's blonde beauty was different—windswept, clean. But perhaps he was wrong there, too. He couldn't forget a burning cabin, a man with three bullet-holes in him, or that down the hall slept Martha Jensen, a widow because of this killer named Joe who worked for Lee Deming.

Maybe Lee Deming was not so lovely. Maybe that open, smooth face was just a mask for greed. Jamison wished he knew.

He slipped quietly into the room. Joe, bent over the warbag, heard him. Quick as a cougar, his hand went to his gun. The hand stopped.

The thought fairly whined through the still air that one of them—or maybe both of them—was going to die in this dingy hotel room with its bullet-broken window.

JAMISON said, "You got the wrong room, Joe. Mine's across the hall."

"But the register—" Joe caught himself.

Jamison said, "I sort of expected this, Joe. I remember three rifle shots, and you running, and in a cabin behind you was a dead man."

Joe's nostrils flared in and out. He looked at Jamison's grip on his gun, evidently remembering the man's speed.

He said, his voice thin, "I came to talk to you, Jamison."

Jamison shook his head. "You came to go through my warbag, to make damned sure I'm the man you think I am."

Joe mumbled, "You talk rough, Jamison."

"My gun talks rougher."

Their eyes locked. Jamison watched Joe's shoulder. The dip of that shoulder would tell. The shoulder would move down, the gun would lift. The eyes were trained to tell nothing.

Then, without warning, the shoulder dipped.

Jamison shot with methodical coldness. And Joe lay on the dingy carpet, his blood spreading under him.

Once a bronc had reared up, and flailing hooves had broken this man's nose. A drunken doctor had set it crookedly. Claghorn Jamison had broken that nose again—with a .45 bullet. And Jamison did not feel good. He hated to deprive a fellow human of sunlight and starlight and the feel of the wind.

A woman screamed. Jamison smiled thinly, remembering the fat woman in the bath tub. It sounded like her scream.

People were running in the hall. He heard the lanky clerk's high-pitched voice. He heard another voice he recognized. Marie Watson's voice. Holstering his gun, he went into the hall.

The clerk yelled, "Who did that shooting?"

"I did," Jamison said.

Marie Watson, in a dressing robe, with her hair pulled back and her face sharp, asked, "Why?"

Jamison held her eyes. "I killed Joe," he said.

"Why?" Marie Watson said again.

Jamison shrugged. "He came to kill me. When I came in, he was searching my warbag."

"Why would he do that?"

Jamison's eyes never left her. "Too bad you can't ask him. He knew, not me."

## TAKE TO THE TUNNEL, CHILDREN!

IN THE infant days of the Arizona Territory, Apache drills were as common in schools as fire drills are today. When Bisbee was a roaring mining camp, the signal to the school for an Apache raid was a series of blasts on the camp whistle—two shorts, one long and one short. Then the teacher led her pupils, who accepted the raids as a matter of course, to the closest mine tunnel for protection from the marauding Indians.

*—Tex Mumford*

She looked at him directly, but whatever were her thoughts she hid them as she went out of the room.

Jamison asked the clerk, "She lives here?"

"Steady the year round," the clerk said, and yelled at the crowd, "Everybody get out of this hall—Jamison, you'd better head for Sheriff Fulton and report this."

Jamison smiled. "No use. He can't climb the stairs." He thought, The protector of the people, elected by the people—so fat he can't ride or walk. He said, "I'll report to him."

"And make it damned pronto!" Al Seligman's harsh voice said savagely.

## CHAPTER IV

### *One More for Boot Hill*

IT WAS Al Seligman there behind Jamison all right, tough and hard of face and voice and manner. All the more so because he was in such contract to Lee Deming who stood quietly beside him.

Ignoring the ramrod, Jamison spoke to Lee. "Your hired hand, Joe, tried to rob me. I caught him in the act. I let him draw, then I killed him. Was it at your orders that he was trying to rob me, Miss Deming?"

"I order nobody to do anything wrong, Jamison!" she said defiantly.

He bowed, murmuring, "And I believe you, ma'am." He swung his gaze to Seligman. "Was this Joe gent working for you, Seligman? Acting on your orders?"

In Seligman's face was barely controlled fury. He moved forward, hand on his gun. Jamison moved forward, too. And Jamison hit him—hard. Seligman had not been expecting that, and the fist, hammering against his jaw, drove the dandified foreman back against the wall. But he leaped forward, flung out a fist. Jamison stepped under it and dropped the Bar Nine man with a right hook. Jamison bent down and took the ramrod's gun.

"Hold this for him," he told Lee Deming.

Her blue eyes were steady on him and as she took the gun she said, "You've made a dangerous enemy, mister."

"I've made them before," Claghorn Jamison assured her.

Seligman got to his feet. He wiped his mouth and saw blood. Wild anger flared into his eyes, and he had plunged forward to retaliate when Isaiah Hampsen came between him and Jamison.

The mine owner said soothingly, "Forget it, Al."

Seligman raged, "No man is knocking me—"

Hampsen shook his head. "This ain't the time—or the place."

Seligman drew a hard breath. "All right, Hampsen."

Lee Deming took her foreman by the arm and they moved away. Jamison turned toward the stairs to head for the sheriff's office.

Sheriff Fulton had wobbled his bulk inside when Jamison walked in, and was sitting in an enormous arm chair. His eyes were heavy and hopeless.

He said, "You shot Joe. You killed him."

Jamison nodded. "How did you know?"

Fulton said, "Neighbor boy. Has big ears and big eyes and a big mouth and can run like a mountain stream leaping over boulders."

Jamison told his version of what had happened. Fulton lifted his forefinger and looked at it. He seemed much interested in that forefinger.

"I'll send up Verle," he said. "My deputy."

Jamison nodded. "I'll talk to Verle when he gets there."

He moved away. About ten feet away, he suddenly stopped, wheeled around, big, hard, purposeful.

"What's this all about, Fulton?"

He had hoped, by this maneuver, to catch the lawman off-guard. But Fulton's face showed only surprise.

"I don't follow you, Jamison."

Jamison spread his hands. "I come into

town a stranger. I ride across a burning cabin and a dead man. A man who had been shot three times—"

Fulton's sunken eyes followed Jamison's hands. He was silent, a motionless mass of flesh.

"Next I know," Jamison went on, "somebody tries to kill me in my hotel room. It was only luck the bushwhacker missed me. Then comes this gent Joe, a man I never met before now, to search my warbag. I call him and he goes for his iron, so I have to kill him. Besides that, Seligman tried to pick trouble with me."

Fulton asked, "Why?" His eyes were still down.

"That's what I'm asking you."

Fulton looked up, and now his face was bland and blank. "I don't know," he said. And he sounded sincere. Sincere, and sick.

Jamison felt sorry for him. This massive, bulky St. Bernard of a man was dying. And he, Jamison, was bothering him with his troubles when probably Fulton was already thinking beyond this earth. With some words that might have been a murmured apology, he went quickly away.

ACROSS the street, Lee Deming was being assisted into the seat of a buckboard by Al Seligman. Seligman glared at Jamison, but said nothing. His lips were swollen. Lee Deming also looked away.

Jamison went into the hotel and asked the clerk, "Is Mrs. Jensen awake?"

"Doc Welters left orders that nobody is to talk to her. She's had a shock, Doc says."

Suddenly a new thought that hit Jamison brought him up stiff and straight. Could it be possible that Jensen had died because he knew too much? This seemed to be a deadly range, ambush range. And if he had known something and had told his wife, and as almost every man did, Martha Jensen should know why her husband had been murdered!

Jamison took the stairs two at a time, the clerk gawking at him as if he thought the man had suddenly gone loco. When Jamison knocked on Marie Watson's door, and she opened it, her voice showed her exasperation.

"What do you want now?"

"I'm going to talk to Mrs. Jensen, and I want you along."

"Me?" Her eyes held a puzzled look. "Have you gone crazy, Jamison? Why should I come with you?"

"Come along."

He took her hand. She came without protesting further. Down the hall he tapped gently on Mrs. Jensen's door, then opened it.

He and Marie Watson stood there and stared! Every drop of blood drained from his face. His cheek-bones stood out and his lips trembled. Marie's hands were clenched, her eyes were riveted on Mrs. Jensen.

"Oh, My God!" she moaned.

Jamison's voice was toneless. "Maybe it's a good thing for me I did want someone with me when I talked to her. Now nobody can say I did this. They've blamed everything else on me, so far."

Marie was sobbing, her face covered, and Jamison was deathly sick, staring at Mrs. Jensen. She lay on her back. Beside her was a small pistol—a .22-caliber revolver. But why hadn't a report been heard? Then he realized that the pistol must have been muffled by a pillow. And there had been commotion, plenty of noise in the hall.

Martha Jensen was not pretty now. A bullet had split her face.

"Another suicide!" Marie Watson whispered.

Jamison wheeled on her. *"Another?"*

"Yes. A few months ago—a man here in town—he killed himself."

Jamison tried to keep his voice level. "What was his name?"

"Charlie Crouse," she sighed. "He was a bank examiner."

Jamison did not dare let her see his face. He looked back at the dead woman. She had known something that might have tied in with all this trouble, but now she was silenced forever.

"I'll notify the sheriff," he said dully, and breathed a deep sigh. . . .

Claghorn Jamison did not sleep well that night. And at daylight, when he ate breakfast in the Broken Shaft Café, Beavertail was already roaring. The mines were changing shifts. Saloons were running full blast. Lamps were lighted in tents and the honkytonk girls looked weary and red-eyed.

Jamison was conscious that all eyes were upon him as he ate, but his thoughts were not on them nor on his food. He was thinking, The big boss in Helena should have sent me here instead of Charlie. Claghorn Jamison is a stranger here, but everybody knew Charlie was a bank examiner. So somebody killed Charlie and made it look like suicide.

Marie Watson came into the café, and she and Jamison nodded, but said nothing. When he was on his way out, though, he stopped at her table.

"For a banker, you're up early, Miss Watson."

"Lots of work," she said.

Jamison smiled. "You should be a gambler. Gamblers don't work, Miss Watson."

"Are you a gambler?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes." He was thinking, She has schooled herself well. Or am I barking up the wrong tree?

"This should be a good town for a gambler," she said. "These miners have money and they are fools. And a fool and his money, you know."

Jamison moved on.

OUTSIDE, on the plank sidewalk, he kept thinking of Louise, of how much he still loved her, missed her. Such thoughts were not good, for they sapped a man's strength, and could do Louise no good. She was sleeping now, just as Charlie Crouse slept, and the Jensens, and—yes, the gunman named Joe.

"Nice morning, Mr. Jamison," someone said, and he turned and saw Isaiah Hampsen. The mine owner, finished with lighting his cigar, turned it in his thick fingers, looked at the ash, and asked Jamison, "You want a job?"

Jamison shook his head. "No job."

Cigar smoke made a blue cloud. "I sort of like you, Jamison. A man who fights his own battles. A man also with some education, I judge."

Jamison said sourly, "Thanks," and moved away, leaving Hampsen standing there, cigar drooping forgotten against the push of his thoughts.

Jamison went into the Silver Dollar. At a table where a sallow-faced dealers was dealing stud, he slid into an empty chair and bought a stack. Although he was not an expert, he liked to play poker, to match his skill and wits against those of the better players. But this morning his mind was not on the game, though it was busy. He was musing that he could go to the bank, show his credentials, and close the bank for audit. But what would he gain? Only hard work—book work. The bank was not manufacturing counterfeit money. But the bank—if he was right—was distributing it.

Of one thing, however, he was certain. This bogus currency organization was close-knit. Likely the bank was only a cog, not the center of it. This was evidently a far-flung enterprise that had its end, not its beginning, here in the raw boom town called Beavertail, Territory of Montana.

"Your bet, fellow," the dealer said.

Jamison smiled. "Sleepy, I guess." He raised the ante. "Too much activity last night."

"Heard you were busy," the dealer said.

Jamison squinted at his cards. "Second suicide here in a few months, I heard."

The player next to him said, "Yeah, feller name of Charlie Crouse was the other. Examined the bank. Got drunk as hell, and they found him dead the next morning. Shot through the head. His own gun."

Jamison said, "Probably remorse after his spree."

Jamison suddenly wished he had not shown so much curiosity. For he noticed then that Isaiah Hampsen had followed him into the saloon and had heard every

word. And Claghorn Jamison had his own ideas about Isaiah Hampsen.

Jamison saw the mine owner in the back-bar mirror. He might have been wrong, but he got the impression that Hampsen had been watching him in that same mirror.

After about ten minutes, Hampsen sauntered over and got into the game, buying two hundred dollars' worth of chips. He took the chair opposite Jamison. The bank examiner was winning. He was riding a streak of luck, and he used his spurs.

Men came and went—miners in overalls, carrying lunch pails, and cowboys in chaps and talking spurs. Jamison was surprised at not seeing more gold dust around, for the mines mined gold. Then he heard someone mention that the mines paid off in silver and bills, not in gold.

Besides Hampsen's mine, the Discovery, there were two other mines—the Zortman and the Landusky. Hampsen owned them all, though. He had made some pretty clever financial transactions back East. Jamison had already heard much speculation as to the wisdom of Isaiah Hampsen's mine purchases. Experienced gold men declared the veins were shallow and that Hampsen would lose money when the showndown came.

Hampsen had been in Beavertail for three years. So had Marie Watson. Jamison gave some careful consideration to these two facts, as his mind wavered between his card playing and more important matters. Finally his interest in cards lost out, at least for the time being.

He tossed in his cards and pushed back his chair. "Enough for me," he said. "Deal me out."

Hampsen looked up, eyes sharp. "You're ahead," he reminded.

Jamison grinned as he cashed in his checks with the dealer. "Always quit when I'm ahead," he said. His words might have had an implication, or they might not have had. "Good habit to get into."

"Maybe so," Hampsen agreed, with a shrug, and went back to his cards.

## CHAPTER V

### *Volunteer Sodbuster*

CLAG JAMISON walked out of the Silver Dollar counting his winnings. He had won enough for his current expenses, besides board and hotel room.

In the raw, cool sunshine of the high country he filled his lungs with air that held the spruce and pine smell good and strong. But his thoughts were far away from this Montana country, remembering the trail drives, cows drifting north out of Texas—and Charlie's good-natured smile. Their banter, their eager anticipation.

"Heading 'em north, Clag."

"New country, Charlie."

And Charlie would cock his head, looking across the endless space of Colorado. "Montana, Clag. Wonder what's up there for us?"

Jamison knew now what had awaited his saddlemate, and his face was bleak. Charlie had not committed suicide. Somebody in this town knew *how* Charlie had died, *why* he had been killed.

When Jamison stopped by the bank, Marie was not there. A little old man was at the window.

Jamison said to him, "Give me some big ones for these little ones."

The old man counted the bills slowly, fingers trembling. Jamison gave the interior a lengthy scrutiny. Neat. Ledgers filed properly, desks clean, the big safe black and shiny.

"Lots of business?" he asked the old man conversationally.

"Yep—since the mines started operating."

"Before that, there were lots of cattle here, weren't there?"

"Passel of cows here yet. The Bar Nine runs about ten thousand head." The old man handed Jamison his money, and he left.

The town was full of miners and drift-

ers. Restaurants were doing a good business, but the miners mostly ate at the beanery operated by the mines. Hampsen got them coming and going—low wages, and they had to buy their grub and supplies from his commissary, too.

Jamison longed for the open range, for the wind, for a horse under him, for cattle grazing. Why had he ever traded a saddle for a pencil? Some day, though, he would return to the saddle and start a spread of his own.

He wanted his spurs, and they were in his room. At the hotel, he climbed the stairs, his footstep soundless on the runner. At the head of the stairs he stopped short, eyes on Marie Watson who had just knocked on his door. Jamison moved back so she could not see him.

She waited a moment, then tried the knob. The door was locked. She shrugged and turned back toward the stairs.

Jamison stepped out. He said, "I just saw you knocking at my door, Miss Watson. Did you want to see me?"

She looked at him, but the shadows masked her expression as she said coldly, "Then you saw something that did not happen. I have not been knocking on your door, Mr. Jamison."

He shook his head. "You tried my door."

She caught her breath indignantly and, head high, she tried to go by him, but he grabbed her shoulders and twisted her around. And in that instant he realized that this woman could not be pushed too far. For she did not resist—just let herself go limp, and spoke quietly.

"Please take your hands off me."

She shook her head. "I did not knock on your door." Jamison let his hands drop. This woman was a puzzle to him, soft and quiet and smooth as she was. She was deep, too, with strong undercurrents in her personality. With one she loved she would flare with anger one minute; the next she would purr.

Suddenly, without warning, she slapped him.

"Take that for your damned nosy ways!" she snapped at him, turned swiftly and walked away. Jamison admired her straight back as she turned the corner, dress swishing, and went down the stairs.

Jamison rubbed his jaw. He grinned.

THEN he unlocked the door of his room, got his spurs, and went back downstairs himself, and out into the street. At the livery stable, he saddled his horse and set out for a ride across the range.

A little way out, someone riding into town caught his attention. He noticed the pinto first—a black and gray. A fancy, tough, blaze-faced horse. Then he saw the rider. Blonde hair under a cream-colored stetson, face a little too wide, yet healthily tanned and lovely. As she approached, Jamison doffed his flat-brimmed hat.

"Morning, Miss Deming."

Lee Deming reined in and said sharply, "I thought you had left this range, drifter. Or does it take you a long time to learn a lesson?"

Jamison pulled good air into his lungs. He looked at the cones of the Little Rocky Mountains to the west, reaching upward to grab the clouds; looked back at the girl owner of the Bar Nine. Wind stirred Lee Deming's silk blouse, and the buckskin riding skirt hugged her full thighs. Jamison masked behind a gambler's face the thoughts that such sights bring to any healthy male. He had had one woman, the only one he had ever desired, or ever would. Marie Watson had stirred him, but that attraction had been neither healthy nor natural, based as it had been on the fact that she resembled Louise. And the attraction had quickly died a natural death.

Looking at Lee Deming now Jamison smiled slightly. "I thought I might take up farming," he said. "Wheat farming should pay in this country. A man can haul his wheat into Malta or Chinook at threshing time in the fall."

He had expected an explosion. He knew that the only land around here that could be legally homesteaded was claimed by her Bar Nine. If Lee Deming was opposed to sodbusters, what he said should have drawn some reaction from her. But she

only cocked her head and studied him, eyes lidded.

"You don't look like a farmer. They tell me you are a good poker player, though. Why would a good poker player want his hands on the handle of an old plow?"

"You're a lovely girl," Jamison said.

She had not expected that. Her eyes opened wide. "Now what brought that on, Mr. Jamison?"

He said, "Because it's true."

Her blue eyes were speculative. "Quite a man," she said. "You shoot down one of my top men, then tell me I'm lovely. But you won't find me one to bend whichever way you want me to."

"To be bluntly and painfully truthful, Miss Deming," Jamison said, "I don't want you any way at all."

Color flamed in her face. "Then what the hell do you want? You're not on this range for any good!"

Hooves clattered behind them, then Al Seligman was loping toward them on his chestnut sorrel.

Jamison murmured, "If Seligman rubs me the wrong way again, I'll pull my gun—for keeps, Miss Deming."

Seligman pulled in the sorrel, gravel sliding under the shod hooves. "This gent bothering you, Lee?" he demanded.

"I can take care of myself, Al!"

A challenging smile tugged at the corners of the foreman's mouth as he gazed at Jamison, who gave him insolence for insolence. But as Jamison saw the man's swollen lips, the hate in his eyes, he knew that his blow had not hurt this man. What had hurt was the blow to his pride. And because of that, sooner or later he would fight.

"If you stay on this range," Seligman said, "I might have to kill you, Jamison."

The man's arrogance, his domineering attitude, were plain evidence of how his pride was jabbing him. Al Seligman had, Jamison knew, a rather inflated idea of his own importance. In the three years he had been on this range not only had he worked up to becoming ramrod, but he had bought in a small share of the Bar Nine. Jamison believed that the man was somehow tied in with all that had been going on here in Beavertail and on the range, but he had no proof. Just suspicions.

"Al," Lee Deming said blandly, "Mr. Jamison was just telling me he might take up a homestead here."

AL SELIGMAN'S smile held arrogant cynicism. "And I might have the pleasure of running you out, Jamison."

"Maybe like Jensen?"

The unexpected shot went true. Saligman leaned forward in his saddle menacingly.

"You're free with your tongue."

Jamison played a high card. "Joe almost ran into my horse the day he burned down the Jensen spread," he accused flatly. "He told you about seeing me. You told him to get rid of me, that I knew too much."

Jamison wondered whether Lee Deming's surprise were genuine or feigned. "Al!" she cried breathlessly. "Did—did Joe burn down Jensen's spread?"

Seligman told her, and to Jamison it sounded as if it had been rehearsed. "Joe was out after a deer when he saw that fire, and he was running away before he got the blame for it, him being a Bar Nine man. He ran into this jigger here, like he says. But Joe didn't kill Jensen, and he didn't burn the outfit."

She said, on a long, hard breath, "I believe you, Al."

Jamison thought, How much do you believe, sister? He turned his horse. "Well, I must be on my way. Got to spot a homestead before dark."

Seligman reined his horse in front of him. "And if you don't find that homestead?"

Jamison said. "There'd be nothing here to hold me, Seligman. Unless I stuck around for a gun showdown with you."

They eyed each other. Bulldogs, big and tough, circling, ready to tear, to kill. Then Seligman said:

"Good idea, Jamison."

Jamison glanced at Lee Deming. Her full breasts rose and fell beneath the sheer

silk blouse, but in her blue eyes—was it fear, he saw, or relief?

"Good day, Miss Deming," he said.

"So long, Mr. Jamison."

He loped away. His back was toward them, but he had confidence in Lee Deming. Seligman would not reach for his Winchester in the saddle boot while she was watching him. So Jamison rode on over a hill and into a draw, and there Marie Watson sat a blue roan.

He thought, This sure is a range of women.

She had seen him talking to Lee Deming and Seligman. But Al had ridden from this direction. Had he been talking with Marie while he, Jamison, talked with Lee?

He was grinning as he rode up, rubbing his jaw and wincing.

"You pack a hard wallop, Miss Watson."

"Not like you, though. You really marked up Al Seligman," Be fore he could answer, she said quickly, "Jamison, why do you hate Al?"

Fishing, eh? He decided to do some lying himself. They had all lied to him enough.

"We used to go to school together in Texas. We fought from the time we first met."

Oh. I thought he was from back East somewhere."

"He tell you that?" But she had made the slip he wanted. "He lied to you," he said.

She just shrugged. "Where are you going?"

Jamison told her, as he had told Lee Deming, that he was looking for a homestead. She looked surprised, and more so when he wanted to know what she was doing out on the range. Just out for a ride for her health? She looked mighty healthy—and beautiful—to him. He spread the flattery rather thick. She liked it. They all liked the lies.

"Farming is a tough job," she said thoughtfully.

Jamison asked, "Are the farmers in debt to you?"

"Only to the limit of what their working tools are worth. Or their livestock."

"Future earnings, then, are worthless?"

"On this land, yes. Not enough rain. I just came from talking to a farmer who can't even pay the interest on his mortgage."

Jamison grinned at her. "Well, when you get me mortgaged up to the hilt, Miss Watson, maybe you'll have to take me in, feed me and take care of me. I'll gladly homestead if you'll foreclose on me like that."

Her eyes showed nothing. "At least your approach is different, Jamison. It has originality."

## CHAPTER VI

### *Grim Warning*

MARIE WATSON was not watching the rimrock. Jamison thought, How wrong I was—how dead wrong! How could I ever have thought she was like Louise? She's cold, and Louise was warm.

Longing for his wife who was gone possessed him, and helplessness because she had been taken from him. Hurting thoughts — futile thoughts, as he, too, stared at the rimrock.

The dark, igneous rock stretched along the basin's rim, guardian against the wilderness. Once the world had cooled, and shot up this mass—boiling lava then—and rain and snow and ice had since worn its edges smooth.

Marie said, "I thought I saw something move up there, but its so far away I can't really tell."

Jamison said, "Maybe a deer."

"Maybe." As she looked at him now, he was sure that her lips moved to say, "You're an egotist, but I could like you, at that."

He moved his bronc closer. She did not rein away. Her face was turned up to his, her lips opened slightly. Jamison almost kissed her. Then he smiled.

"You're a damned good actress, Marie."

"Why do you say that?"

Jamison moved his bronc away. "You'd better get away from here," he said. "I might forget I'm a gentleman."

She fairly hissed at him, hot and angry, reminding him more than anything else of a cat with her back up, the fur standing:

"You go to hell!"

"With pleasure."

They knew then, where they stood, and Jamison had one pang of regret, because she *had* awakened in him thoughts he had tried for so long to keep buried. She was in this crooked mess—he knew that now, just as he knew two men who were in it. It had to be cleared up, for Charlie Crouse's sake, if for no other reason. Charlie, asleep in a lonesome grave. Charlie, who had been his best friend.

He remembered Charlie at his wedding, and the boy's bright eyes when he'd said:

"You got a real girl, Clag. Name your first son after me?"

And his own promise: "Sure will, Charlie."

Then Charlie had kissed Louise, and Jamison, thinking of it, bent low in saddle, for he did not want this woman here to see the terrible loneliness in his eyes. But even in that moment he was making a solemn vow—to kill the man, or woman, who had killed Charlie.

"Go on," he ordered Marie, almost harshly.

She slashed at him, struck him with her shot-loaded quirt, then the quirt came down on her bronc's rump, furiously, urging him into a gallop. She went over a rise at top speed and he was alone, rubbing his sore forearm.

He rode on then, but his thoughts were racing as fast as her mount. He kept remembering the burning shack, the Jensen homestead. He had lost all idea of where he was when the bullet came from the rimrock.

A rifle bullet. It sang over his head, slammed into the earth ahead of him. Instantly he was off his bronc and in the rocks. He had not had time to grab his rifle from his saddle-holster. He had only his six-shooter.

No more shots came as he lay there protected by a sandstone boulder. He watched the rimrock, but saw no movement there. Marie Watson had been interested in the rimrock. Had she planted a gunman up there to fire at him. Still, if she had, would she have called his attention to it by looking at the rimrock? She was smart, though. She might have thought she could clear herself from suspicion in that way.

Jamison realized then that the man on the rim had not shot to kill. He could have done that easily. Jamison had been a perfect target.

When a quarter of an hour had passed and no more bullets came, Jamison began working his way, boulder by boulder, to the rimrock. Within half an hour he had reached it and stood with the wind whipping against him. Below him, in the distance, he saw three riders. Marie, one of them, had just about reached Beavertail. So she hadn't shot at him. If she had ridden to the rimrock she could not have been so close to town now.

The other two riders were moving toward the Bar Nine. Had they ambushed him. they could not possibly have been so far away now. And that eliminated Al Seligman and Lee Deming.

Jamison, moving along the rimrock, found the cartridge—a Winchester .30-30 case. But thousands of such rifles were in use. On the flinty rock underfoot he saw the imprint of a sole. The ambusher had worn shoes, not boots. Marie and Lee and Seligman had all worn high-heeled riding boots.

Then Jamison saw a piece of paper, held down with a rock. He reached for it and read:

Get out of this country and stay out

It was fine bond paper, but its quality was not what intrigued him. He put it in his pocket, knowing now that the bullet had, as he had suspected, been intended to warn, not to kill.

As he went back to get his bronc, he was thinking of that paper, and his face was grim. For the words of warning had not been written with pen or pencil. They had been printed!

Jamison mounted, to ride back to town, but he had not ridden far when he was suddenly halted by a man who came out of the high underbrush. The black bore of the shotgun he carried covered Jamison. About a hundred yards away was a farm shack.

"What you doing here, puncher?" the man demanded.

Jamison sat his saddle in silence, hands raised shoulder high. He did not like that 12-gauge shotgun. It could blow a hole the size of a man's fist, at this close range.

The six-foot heavy man holding it was plainly a farmer. He wore bib overalls, a blue shirt, and heavy shoes.

"I'm scouting for a homestead," Jamison told him.

"You a Bar Nine rider?"

Jamison shook his head. "The Bar Nine hates my guts, hombre. I'm the one who shot Joe. Jamison is my name."

The shotgun went down, breath whistled out of the man's lungs, and Jamison sighed with relief. The farmer said, "You took the Widow Jensen into town, too, after you pulled Jim's body out of the fire, didn't you?"

Jamison nodded.

"There's lots of land, Jamison—Say, I thought I heard a rifle shot awhile back. Reckon that's why I'm so spooky."

"Ambush," Jamison said, and told about the ambusher on the rimrock. He did not tell about the printed warning. Then he said, "Is Lee Deming fighting you farmers?"

"The Bar Nine is."

"But is *she* fighting you?"

"She's the Bar Nine," the farmer pointed out.

Jamison shook his head. "Don't forget Seligman. Lee Deming says she ordered her crew not to bother the homesteaders."

"They've cut our fences. We've lost cattle. Since the Jensen place was burned we patrol nights. I had two milk cows stole out of my pasture. The Bar Nine did that."

"Are you sure?"

"I never seen Seligman or his hands do it, but who else would it be?"

Jamison said, "I've heard the Bar Nine had been losing cattle, too. They claim the farmers have been butchering them."

"That's a lie, so's they can pick trouble with us!"

Jamison's face was grave. Somewhere cattle tied into this, were a part of all the trouble.

"So long," he said, and picked up his reins. "I'm riding over to look at the Jensen homestead. Sheriff Fulton says the land is open for filing again.

"Reckon it would be."

As Jamison rode away, he was thinking—this sodbuster insisted that farmers were not butchering Bar Nine cows wholesale. But Sheriff Fulton said the Bar Nine complained bitterly about farmers rustling plenty of cattle. Cattle became beef, to be eaten by men. And if those men were not farmers, who were they, and where were they?

Jamison was sure Jensen had been killed because he'd known too much. His wife had been murdered to silence her. Yet they had been pitifully poor, poverty-stricken. Or could that have been only pretence? If they *had* been mixed up in rustling, say, and had suddenly sprouted out in good clothes, become prosperous, suspicion would instantly have pointed their way.

He rode past the Jensen homestead, dismounted on a hill, and squatted to watch the land below. His fieldglasses searched the brush, but he saw nothing suspicious, and went back to the burned cabin. He had been walking around only about ten minutes when a rider came into the clearing and drew rein.

"Why, hello, Jamison!"

Jamison wondered if the surprise in Isaiah Hampsen's voice was genuine. He also wondered how the man had managed to ride in so soon after he, Jamison, had seen no riders on the range.

He said, "Looking around, Mr. Hampsen."

Hampsen dismounted. "Thought I'd ride out here and scout around, too. This Jensen trouble has me all at sea. Jensen

and I used to play cribbage a lot—good friends." He looked thoughtfully at the ashes. "Wonder if it *was* suicide and an accidental fire."

Jamison shrugged. "I reckon it makes no difference. But it looks like his wife loved him so much she wanted to die with him."

Hampsen's face was colorless, without expression, as if without thoughts. "I reckon so," he said. "It gives a man a mighty queasy feeling, Jamison. Say, how come you're out here?"

Again Jamison told the cock-and-bull story about looking for a homestead.

Hampsen nodded slowly. "Every man wants land of his own, I reckon."

He and Jamison paced the farm's boundaries. Hampsen dug into the soil, fingers probing.

"Good soil," he said. He let it fall from his fingers.

"I like the place," Jamison said and, back at the burned cabin went into his saddle, lithe and quick. Hampsen lifted his bulk more slowly.

As they rode toward Beavertail shadows were filling the coulees. A band of coyotes, out on the sagebrush flat, ran a jack-rabbit. When they came in for the kill, they yelped in delight, then were silent as their fangs ripped flesh.

Jamison said, "The law of nature. Like cattle, say."

Hampsen glanced up. "Cattle?"

"Man slaughters innocent cattle for beef. His teeth are meant for grain, yet he likes beef."

"A good roast is mighty nice."

They rode on in silence, which Jamison let build solid and thick.

Hampsen broke it. "Yep, a good thick steak is good chewing, Jamison."

Jamison said quietly, "The Bar Nine claims the farmers are stealing its cattle."

For a moment, Hampsen considered this, then said, "I've bought a few from Lee Deming for my commissary and beanery. She drives too tough a bargain. I buy cattle from the Milk River country now."

"Well," Jamison said, "I think I've changed my mind. No homestead for me. Too much work for what is in it."

"You've had lots of trouble here, too, Jamison."

Jamison said, "I don't know why they've picked on me, unless Seligman thinks I might aim to lead the farmers against his spread."

When they reached Beavertail, two miners came roaring out of the Silver Dollar, pounding each other. Jamison and Hampsen rode into the livery barn and unsaddled.

"Fools for fighting," Hampsen said, putting his saddle on the rack.

They went outside. One miner was down, and men were holding the other to keep him from using his boots.

Hampsen said, "I'm going to watch this."

## CHAPTER VII

### *Night Visitor*

HAMPSEN may have liked to watch fights, but Jamison didn't. He wanted peace, and everybody had shoved trouble into his face. He climbed the stairs to his room—and came face to face with Marie Watson in the hall.

"Did you take up a homestead?" she asked.

"No." He gazed at her more intently, but she gave no inkling she was aware of his hungry scrutiny. "I don't like so much work—any work. I'm riding on in the morning, if Seligman will let me get out of Beavertail alive—will you have supper with me, Miss Marie?"

"With pleasure."

"An hour, then."

He nodded, and went to his room. He kept out of view as he moved over to pull down the blind.

In clean clothes, and freshly shaved, he met Marie in the dining room. But as they talked there was a vast emptiness in him. Marie was so lovely —and so shallow.

Isaiah Hampsen came over to their

table toward the end of the meal, and asked permission to sit with them. Jamison was cordial to him, but there was a frown of anger on Marie's forehead.

And a hint of jealousy, too, in Hampsen. Jamison decided both emotions were explainable. He was certain of it when he saw their expressions as he finished, rose from his chair, bowed, and murmured:

"I leave her in your good company, Mr. Hampsen."

He was grinning at the memory of Marie's frown as he went to his room, lit the lamp and lay down on the bed. He made a pretense of reading an old magazine, but his mind was not on the story so he dozed.

At last night came, and the boom town turned mad again as men milled about, looking for trouble. Jamison got up and looked at the bills he had had exchanged for his poker winnings. They were all good bills.

He did some arithmetic. Ten thousand men were paid three dollars a day in the mines. That was around thirty thousand dollars a day, and they got paid twice a month. On pay-days, almost half a million dollars were in circulation in this town. It was a big business. And somewhere was a gigantic sack, held by certain people in this town.

Jamison decided it was about time to pull the strings that would close that sack tight. He opened his door quietly, and slipped downstairs.

At the livery barn, the hostler was out. Leaving his own horse and saddle in the stall, he threw a saddle on a bay gelding, but took his own rifle from his saddle-boot, putting another rifle from another saddle in its place. With his horse in the stall, his saddle on the rack, and a rifle in the scabbard, it would look as if he were still in his room.

He led the borrowed horse out the back door into the alley which ran behind the sheriff's office. Inside the office, a lamp was turned low. Jamison dismounted and went in by the back door. What he had to say to the lawman was private.

Sheriff Fulton was sitting in his wide chair, gross body slanting across his desk. Jamison spoke to him, but he did not answer. A dull clanging inside him, Jamison gripped the lawman's shoulder. The flesh was cold!

Jamison picked up a vial on the desk, looked at the pills inside it, and carefully replaced the vial.

He lifted the sheriff's head, saw the sagging face, the bloodless jowls, and closed eyes. Gently he lowered the giant head to the desk again and wiped his hands on his trousers.

Sheriff Henry Fulton's belly did not hurt him now.

With one final glance at the capsules, Jamison slipped out the back door to his bronc and rode out of town.

When he reached the sagebrush he rode at a high trot, trying not to think of Sheriff Fulton, for ahead lay the Bar Nine.

JAMISON looked at the gun, a small, nickel-plated .32. The hand that was holding it was small, too, but the grip of the forefinger curled around the trigger was determined.

Jamison said, "I'm here as a friend, Miss Deming."

Her eyes were bright with suspicion. The lamplight made a halo around her blonde hair.

She snapped, "Friends don't come into your house through a window. They don't come unannounced into a woman's bedroom, either. One yell from me and my riders will be here and tear you apart!"

"You won't yell," Jamison said grimly. "Because I've got something important to tell you, Lee Deming. For one thing, you probably don't know that Al Seligman has a guard out here each night."

"A—guard?"

Jamison nodded. "I slugged him. He's gagged and tied in the brush. That's why I had to come in through the window. And another thing—I let you throw down on me with that nickel-plated gun, and I could have knocked it out of your hand when you pulled it from under the pillow."

The clock on her bureau ticked loudly as they watched each other.

He said, "You've been losing cattle, Miss Deming?" and she nodded. "You sold some cattle to Hampsen. Your price, he said, was too high. So he stopped buying your cattle. Who would pay cash, when he can steal those same cattle?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Seligman drives your cattle to the Milk River country and rebrands them with a Box Eight. A cinch, from a Bar Nine. When the brands have healed he sells the cows for a few cents on the dollar to Hampsen. I know, because I've dug around a little."

She said, barely above a whisper, and looking down at her bare feet, "I suspected something. I'll tell Sheriff Fulton."

Jamison shook his head slowly. "Fulton was working with them—got his cut. Now Fulton is dead. Suicide."

Blood drained from her face. She leaped up, oblivious to how her nightgown clung, outlining her curved young figure.

"Sheriff Fulton! Dead?"

Jamison nodded, then told her about finding the lawman. Gradually color came back into her face. She said mournfully, "I've known him all my life. He and my father were friends." She paused. "But he lived off my money?" She studied Jamison with shaded eyes. "Where do *you* stand in this?"

"You don't know?"

She shook her head. "All I know is I've been played for a fool by Al Seligman. I'm just a woman—and dumb, at that, I guess."

Jamison knew this was no act. Marie Watson could put on an act, but this girl couldn't. She was innocent of any wrongdoing aside from foolishly allowing her foreman to use her. At that, she'd had some suspicions.

Jamison said quietly, "I'm a bank examiner for the Federal authorities and territorial bankers. Some time ago another examiner came to Beavertail to look over the bank. He's in a grave now, a bullet through his head."

She caught a sharp breath. "*That* man! You mean Charlie Crouse? Why, he killed himself!"

"So Fulton said, and so the coroner's report reads. But I know better. I also know about five people who came into this area at the same time, where the take runs into a million dollars. They worked on the theory that one kind of trouble hides another. Seligman is one of these people. He got you into trouble with the farmers as a smoke-screen to hide the real activity."

"You mean stealing my cattle wasn't his real purpose?"

Jamison shook his head. "I've said enough for now. In another hour I might be dead—killed. But I came here first to tell you about your cattle, because if I'm killed you never will know."

"But why think of me?"

His voice was low. "Can't you guess?"

HE MOVED closer, caught the sweet scent of her blonde hair, her body, her perfume. But abruptly he stopped, cocked his head, listened, and scented the wind. A weird feeling made him alert, and when he spoke his voice was low.

"Somebody will find that guard I slugged. I think there was another guard, too. I have to talk fast, because if I'm killed you can relay this information to the law."

He talked rapidly then. Her face was a mirror of her conflicting emotions. Outside, a horse neighed, the sound shrill against the night. When Jamison finished, Lee Deming said tightly:

"So that's their game!"

Jamison said, "I made a mistake coming here under my own name. Charlie made a mistake by drinking until his tongue got loose and—"

Boots were coming down the hall. Jamison moved back of the curtains that covered a closet. Gun in hand, he waited there. The time had come to kill—or be killed. He thought of Charlie.

A knock came on the door.

Lee Deming asked, "Who is it?"

"Al, Lee. I've got to talk to you."

"Come in, Al," she called.

Seligman walked in, gun in his fist. He

could not see Jamison, shadowed by the curtains.

"Are you all right, Lee?"

"Of course I'm all right. Why? And why knock on my door and come in here with your gun in your fist?"

"Because somebody slugged a guard I had out. There were two, and when the other one found him knocked cold he hurried to warn me that somebody was around here. So my first thought was for your safety, Lee."

"Nice of you." Her voice held sarcasm. "Are you getting ready to steal some more of my cattle, Seligman?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jamison said, "You know, Seligman!"

For a moment Seligman was frozen, his face bleak. Then he whirled, heels digging into the carpet, staring at Clag Jamison as though at a ghost.

"Jamison, huh?" he grunted.

"I slugged your guard. I told Lee about your stealing her cattle, and about your Milk River ranch. I'm the bank examiner who came to see what had happened to Charlie Crouse."

Seligman said between his teeth, "But you're not getting off this ranch alive! If I can't kill you, some of my gunmen will. They're outside in the brush looking for you now."

Jamison had expected that. He had been with Lee Deming too long. His presence on the ranch had been discovered.

He said, "You're just a flashy blowhard, Seligman. Joe did your dirty work until my bullet stopped him. *You* wouldn't have the guts to kill Charlie Crouse, even from behind."

"Maybe I killed him, Jamison." Seligman's face was hard. "Maybe I didn't. But he was no suicide."

"No more than was Mrs. Jensen, eh?"

"No more than she was."

Lee had moved back against the wall, terror on her young face. Jamison said to her, "Better get out, Miss Deming. There's going to be trouble."

She ran to the door, nightgown swishing.

Seligman thought he saw his chance. But Jamison's glance at Lee as the door slammed had been deliberate.

Seligman raised his gun, face drawn with fury. He shot and Jamison shot, and it sounded like one, only Jamison's bullet was an inch ahead. Jamison had thought, This is for Charlie! and sent his bullet into Seligman's throat. He didn't know where Seligman's bullet went.

Seligman tried to scream, but no sound came. He tried to take a step, but his knees would not hold him.

When Jamison ran out of the bedroom, Seligman was dead on the floor. Jamison cried to Lee Deming, "I killed him!" ran on down the hall and smashed a window with his .45.

He leaped out into the moonlight.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Killers by Night*

LANDING on his feet, Clag Jamison stumbled, rolled. Men were pouring from the bunkhouse. Kneeling, he shot twice, stampeding them, scattering them like scared sagehens.

Leaping to his feet, he ran for the underbrush. A gun flared at his right, but was too far away to target him accurately as he ran swiftly, zigzagging. He crashed into the brush and almost fell again, over some tangled dead willows.

Men were howling behind him—dogs scenting a wolf. But the buckbrush covered his path, and he moved swiftly. Within minutes, he was in saddle in the high boulders overlooking the valley where the Bar Nine buildings stood.

The home spread was ablaze with lights. Lanterns bobbed as men searched for him. He remembered the terrified look on Lee Deming's face, but there was no time for him to allow his thoughts to dwell on the blonde girl. She had been warned, and his job at the Bar Nine was finished. Doubly finished, with Seligman dead.

Claghorn Jamison turned his horse toward Beavertail. Two of the schemers

who had been responsible for Charlie's death were still alive.

Nevertheless, it was a hard chore he had ahead of him. He never realized fully, though, just how hard it was until he arrived in Beavertail—and again faced a woman.

This one was not wearing a flimsy, revealing nightgown. She was wearing riding breeches, riding boots, and a silk blouse. And she had been packing a small bag when he knocked on the door.

"Who is there?" she called.

"Me—Isaiah," Jamison lied, trying to fake the mine owner's voice.

Evidently he managed the voice impersonation successfully, for Marie Watson opened the door. She tried to scream as she recognized him, but he clamped a hand over her mouth and forced her back to the bed, her body bending against him.

He took his hand from her mouth then, and she demanded furiously:

"What do you want?"

He said, now that he was safely in the room, "You holler, sister, and by hell I'll choke the breath out of you with my bare hands!"

He made that threat sound tougher than he was himself, for he could never have choked her, or any other woman, no matter how much she needed choking. But the threat worked, for he saw fear in her dusky eyes, in the tremble of her curved red lips.

"I won't—call out, Jamison," she said meekly.

He said, "All ready to pull out, eh? So it got too hot for your pretty little rear, did it, sister? Maybe you thought I wasn't on the right track, or that I could be sidetracked, but—"

"You've been on the right track ever since you hit town, bank examiner. You had a little luck, too—like running into Joe right after he'd killed Karl Jensen."

Jamison nodded, watching her. "I'll admit it did take awhile to add it all up," he said slowly. "You're in this mess I'm interested in in this town, and in deep, woman. I even figure the blood of Mrs. Jensen is on your pretty hands, that you killed her."

[*Turn page*]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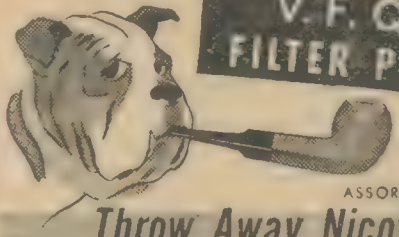

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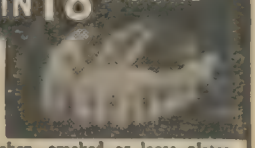

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Her face was flint. Her breasts heaved. Her lips were a thin red line.

"Well, Jamison?"

"You and your pards came here at about the same time—all of you probably tied up with counterfeiting back East. Hampsen had to make it look good, so he bought the mines. You sent the money out to the miners in their pay envelopes."

"What are you leading up to?"

Jamison clipped, "Just this. You talk, and it'll go easier on you when this comes to trial. The signs all point to Hampsen, even his jealousy of you. You might as well talk now. You almost did, once."

"When?" Her voice was unsteady.

"The day you knocked on my door. When you saw me you got cold boots. You decided you didn't want to talk, after all."

"You have a good imagination," she scoffed. "So try imagining us in court. We won't be there." She raised her voice. "Isaiah!"

JAMISON had his hand on his gun, but he did not draw it. He heard the curtains rustle behind him. He knew, without looking, that Isaiah Hampsen had come out of the closet. This woman had tricked him, and he had thought he had tricked her!

Jamison watched her face. Once he had thought it soft and lovely; now it was stiff-hard, with eyes that were shiny evil. He turned then, and looked at Hampsen. The squat man held a .45. His jowls were bulldog-hard. In his eyes was a triumphant glint.

"Walked right into our trap, bank examiner. Just like that other one walked into our gun."

"So *you* killed Charlie!" Was that his voice? It sounded so dim, so far-away.

"Shoot him, Isaiah!" Marie cried shrilly, angrily. "Then you go out the window and I'll yell he was attacking me. Shoot him—now!"

Hampsen shook his head. "We'll play with him for awhile, honey." He said to Jamison, "What put you wise to me, bank examiner?"

Jamison watched the .45. "Jensen had a trace of ink on his hands, and whoever heard of a farmer with ink on his hands? You've got to have a printing press somewhere. Maybe it's in your mine. I rode out to look for a cave or something where a printing press could be hidden. You shot at me from the rimrock to scare me away from the neighborhood."

"How did you know *I* shot?"

"I backtracked. You knew I would, or you wouldn't have left the note. But you didn't know I'd also see the imprint of a shoe, not a boot. When you saw me at Jensen's you were wearing shoes. Next time, stick to flint and gravel. They don't show tracks."

Marie snarled, "Kill the devil, Isaiah!"

Jamison kept on talking, kept watching the gun, too. "You're only part of this deal. Your paper stock comes from back East and you print it here and pay off miners in bogus currency. But you can't beat that game, Hampsen."

"We're leaving," Hampsen snapped. "We've got over a million dollars cached in Rio. The mines are played out, anyway. And make no mistake about it, Jamison, we'll reach South America!"

Marie screeched, "Kill him—kill him!"

Hampsen lifted the gun. Above it his small eyes were lethal, deadly.

And Jamison made his play.

Hampsen had expected Jamison to smash into him, was prepared to shoot him through the head as he came on. So Jamison tackled Marie!

He hit her hard, slamming into her. She was not soft; she was hard, unyielding. Jamison heard Hampsen's gun roar, felt the smash of lead against his thigh, but Marie was down. She screamed, and Hampsen shot again.

Jamison rolled past her, under the bed, and was on his knees on the opposite side of the bed when she screamed again. He had never heard such a terrible scream in his life. It died off in the roar of his gun.

He shot four times. Each bullet hit Hampsen, The man walked ahead, gun

[*Turn page*]


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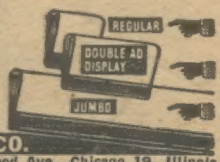


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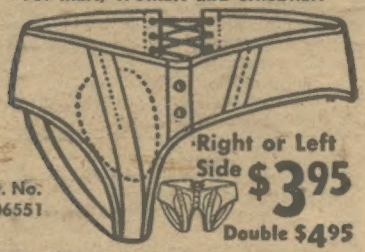

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hanging; the .45 fell. Hampsen stood there, looking down at Marie, on the floor. Blood oozed from the mine owner's chest, seeping through the white shirt and the vest. But when Hampsen raised his head sanity was in his eyes.

"I missed you—and killed her, Jamison," he said.

Crouched beside the bed, gun heavy in his fist, Jamison was sick inside.

HAMPSEN said, "I'll meet her soon." He raised his hands then, looked at them. "Ink on them, too. Just a little, though. I washed them in gasoline." Now he looked at Jamison. "But it was enough —to tie me into my printer—Jensen—"

"You used him to set up machinery, then killed him and his wife to silence them," Jamison said.

Hampsen did not answer. He went down slowly as his knees gave way, until he was beside the woman he had killed.

Jamison stood there, gun heavy. He holstered it. The hotel was wide awake. Men and women moved about in their rooms, in the hall, calling, shouting. Jamison ran to the window and went out. He ran across the next roof, as he had run the day the ambusher had shot at him and had broken the window. He went to the ground in the alley.

Blood was trickling into his boot.

He darted into a shed and tied his handkerchief around the gash in his flesh, then found his bronc and climbed into saddle. For a moment, then, he sat his saddle in silent thought.

He was through here. Charlie could sleep in peace now. Others could come in and make the final checkup. The case had been cracked. And through the smoke of guns, Louise had watched over him.

Jamison thought of Lee Deming.

He looked at the stars. It was not good to live alone, always remembering, always to feel the same loneliness. He would ride out to the Bar Nine. He would talk to Lee Deming.

And Louise—she would understand.

Jamison rode through the sagebrush toward the Bar Nine. • • •

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